

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: "THE NIGHTMARE OF THE NATION":
SAM SHEPARD AND THE PARADOX OF
AMERICAN IDENTITY

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Sam Shepard's plays depict a world in which his characters struggle with a paradox of life in America. Incapable of ever attaining any semblance of their perception of American identity, they also cannot ever define themselves outside of a national character. This paradox occurs, Shepard argues, because America—through its literature, culture, and very history—has promoted and perpetuated a sanitized version of historical events, one that celebrates a self-sufficient, pioneering spirit while de-emphasizing the violent and exclusionary reality of America's past. The unreality of this image instills in Shepard's characters an incessant escapist impulse that emerges as a distinctly American characteristic. Shepard's plays and writings expose this American identity—represented by the strong, hardy figure of the farmer/pioneer/cowboy—as an illusion and suggests that any successful notion of identity must acknowledge the character-shaping influence of the past as well as admit to the reality of an American identity that is inherently violent and inaccessible to most Americans. As Shepard continues to write, his characters have evolved as they attempt to find new forms of American identity.

Chapter One provides a detailed discussion of Shepard's perception of American identity, identifying the source of the fundamental elements of that national character. Chapter Two elaborates on the escapist impulse that pervades Shepard's work, examining the distinct patterns of escapism that Shepard's characters display. Chapter Three explores the shift in Shepard's focus from escape to confrontation, wherein his characters start to realize the futility of denying individual and national heritage and are forced to confront the reality of American character by acknowledging its flaws and the enormous influence of the past. Chapter Four will examine the state of an America that has been stripped of its national myth. Shepard argues that the nation must discover an "essence of myth" that will help provide a collective identity for America.

“THE NIGHTMARE OF THE NATION”:
SAM SHEPARD AND THE PARADOX OF AMERICAN IDENTITY

by

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**“The Nightmare of the Nation”:
Sam Shepard and the Paradox of American Identity**

Introduction

Relaxation is the thing you seek. You spend thousands of hours and dollars and plane rides to get to a place for relaxation. To just disappear for a while.—Kent (*La Turista*, 1967)

I don’t—I don’t want any trouble. I—I came down here just to get away for a while.—Henry (*Eyes for Consuela*, 1998)

Sam Shepard created the characters of Kent and Henry more than 30 years apart, yet they exhibit numerous similarities. Out of a powerful sense of disillusionment, both men express a desire to leave America to rediscover something that they have lost. Both men wind up in Mexico, Shepard’s consistent escape destination for his characters. And both men echo each other’s language; unable to articulate the impulse that compels them to escape, they can only vaguely speak of the need to “disappear.” The similarities between the two characters (and the plays themselves) induced one critic to suggest that *Eyes for Consuela* was merely a “weary” reproduction of *La Turista* (Brantley, “Blinding” E12). And Shepard’s continued visitation of familiar territory compelled another to entitle his review of Shepard’s latest play, *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), “Don’t Play it Again” (Simon 73). After 30 years of drama that examines the state of America and Americans, has Shepard made no progress? Have his characters resisted development, coming no closer to understanding their own identity as Americans? Are critics such as Richard Zoglin

accurate when they argue that Shepard's recent works seem "an exercise in nostalgia for his old, avant-garde self" (81)?

While Sam Shepard continues to address many of the same themes in his works, particularly the individual's search for identity within a larger, national context, his characters have undergone a distinct alteration in their relationship to that American identity. Shepard's plays and writings expose American identity—often represented by Shepard in the strong, hardy figures of the farmer, the pioneer and the cowboy—as an illusion, an incomplete image of American character. His works serve to strip this American identity of its veracity and potency, while opening the door to a new form of national character that can be attained by evoking a more unifying (if still undeveloped) concept of myth. Shepard argues that any successful notion of identity must acknowledge the illusory and historically inaccurate nature of his characters' vision of American identity while also recognizing the ability of the past to influence character on both an individual and national level.

Of course, it takes 30 years and dozens of plays for Shepard's characters to evolve into their current—and still mutable—state (the still-active Shepard continues to produce plays that address these issues). Over the course of his career, Sam Shepard has exposed an America in which its citizens cannot ever attain the fundamental characteristics that constitute his perception of "the American," specifically a strong connection to the land and an unwavering belief in the self-sufficiency of the individual to forge his own success. Shepard culls his perception of "the American" from a multitude of sources, including America's history and culture, especially its pop culture. Shepard's American is often entirely separated from any form of

achievable American identity, unable to obtain a sense of self that corresponds to the principles that he associates with the nation itself. Yet he is also unable to dissociate himself from that national character and find a sense of identity outside his status as an American. Thus a double bind emerges for his characters: their dissatisfaction with their current condition in life leads them to try to escape their misery and attempt to achieve a semblance of American identity, an identity which Shepard posits as ultimately unrealizable. This paradox of American identity consequently instills in Shepard's characters an incessant escapist impulse, an impulse that Shepard argues is a distinctly American characteristic.

An examination of Shepard's corpus, which now spans five decades (having produced work in every decade since the 1960s), reveals a distinct shift in the treatment of this American escapist impulse.¹ Shepard's early characters engage in various attempts to either embrace or deny American identity, both exercises in futility; they participate in self-defeating and often self-destructive escapist behavior because they are unable to reconcile their perception of American identity with the reality of life in America. Beginning with *Buried Child* (1978), however, they begin to recognize the inescapability of their national heritage, so they attempt to confront their conception of national character by acknowledging its inherent falsehoods and recognizing the character-shaping effect of the past. In the process, they often expose the limiting nature of an identity that tends to deny access to most Americans, especially women and minorities. This crisis of confrontation reaches its peak in

¹ While recognizing the importance of Shepard's early one-act plays (and occasionally drawing upon them), this project focuses mainly on Shepard's full-length plays and prose, beginning with 1967's *La Turista*. This project also offers only occasional references to Shepard's now-extensive film career;

States of Shock, an early 1990s play in which Shepard directly calls for America to come to terms with the violent truth of its past and make room for a refashioned model of American identity. Shepard's most recent works explore the void that is created by the withdrawal of any established national character. His characters begin seeking a revitalized, more realistic, and more encompassing model of identity. When the principles that supposedly constitute "the American" are removed, what remains to take their place?

Shepard may not have the answer to that question, but his first step is to shine more light on his image of American identity in order to expose its flaws. This realization, Shepard argues, is the key to recovering identity. While the escapist impulse never completely dissipates—many of Shepard's post-*Buried Child* characters have already "escaped," and are experiencing the consequences of the effort—they begin to understand that the individual must come to terms with his personal and national history in order to regain a unified sense of self.

The problem, Shepard argues, is that the ideology evoked by the purported principles of national identity—an ideology that is promoted and perpetuated by America's literature, popular culture, and history—exists more as illusion than reality. An American identity that supposedly is accessible to all is actually attainable by none, as Shepard demonstrates by continually focusing on white male Americans who routinely fail to achieve any notion of a national character. His plays throughout his career have concentrated almost exclusively on the American male experience; in fact, Bonnie Marranca accurately observes that in Shepard's works, "The voice—of

his film work remains a significant aspect of his career, but extends beyond the scope of this undertaking.

consciousness, of the emotions, of reason, of triumph, and of failure, too—and finally, of America—is a man’s voice” (30).² And even this group is unable to succeed in their quest for character. If this vision of American identity is inaccessible to white men (the one privileged group that created it), then who can achieve it? Shepard’s work, therefore, illustrates not only the conflicted yet eternal search for American identity; it also reveals the imminent difficulties of the search itself.

In order to alleviate the debilitating effects of the self-destructive quest for American identity, Americans must recognize the falsehoods inherent in their vision of national character, exposing its exclusionary and violent nature, while also acknowledging its powerful influence on the character of the nation and the individual. Shepard asserts the impossibility of escaping American heritage; instead, Americans must accept its shaping impact, specifically by admitting to a more accurate reality of America’s past, the history of a nation that has celebrated a pioneering spirit while minimizing and de-emphasizing the violence that accompanied it. In order to recover a sense of identity, American must dispel their sanitized and fictitious illusion of national character by dealing with the often harsh truth of that American identity. Shepard argues (most specifically in *States of Shock*) that events such as Operation Desert Storm serve to expose the complete image of American identity, illuminating the violence that permeates the character of a nation.

² Numerous critics have discussed the androcentric nature of Shepard’s work. In *Staging Masculinity*, Carla McDonough argues that Shepard’s examination of American masculinity is a dominant theme throughout his work. Calling Shepard’s male characters “creatures of the West” (35), she asserts that the “search for male identity is present in every stage of Shepard’s career” (38). Given that Shepard’s primary focus is on male identity, this project will also frame itself in that context, examining Shepard’s conflicted use of masculine images of cowboys, farmers and pioneers to both represent and misrepresent the consciousness of an entire nation.

There are many difficulties in writing about Sam Shepard. His plays contain conflicts and contradictions, and he often creates destabilized characters who undergo non-sequitur transformations in persona, suddenly altering their personalities. Shepard's "Note to the Actors" at the beginning of *Angel City* (1976) exemplifies this transformative technique as he attempts to explain the "abrupt changes which occur in the play":

Instead of the idea of a "whole character" with logical motives behind his behavior which the actor submerges himself into, he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme. In other words, more in terms of collage construction or jazz improvisation. (61-62)

Aside from unstable characters, Shepard's plays also contain chaotic action that often leaves audiences bewildered, such as *States of Shock*, a frenzied play that compelled one critic to label it "arrant nonsense" and sarcastically suggest that Shepard had finally achieved his goal of "total incomprehensibility" (Simon, "Schlock" 71). His plays resist resolution, often ending in states of suspension and ambivalence (Shepard himself has admitted that "endings are just a pain in the ass" [Rosen, "Territory" 6]). And, much like Eugene O'Neill (whose expressionistic *Emperor Jones* is radically different from his realistic *Long Day's Journey into Night*), Shepard experiments with dramatic form, shifting between styles as disparate as realism and absurdism in his plays. For all of these reasons, it becomes difficult to create a unified picture of Shepard's work. Richard Gilman is one of the many critics who has commented on the problematic nature of analyzing Shepard's dramatic corpus:

Shepard's work resists division into periods, stages of growth or development. [...] Shepard doesn't move from theme to theme or image to image in the separate plays; he doesn't conquer a dramatic territory and move on, doesn't extend his grasp or refine it. What he does from play to play is lunge forward,

move sideways, double back, circle round, throw in this or that, adopt a voice then drop it, pick it up again. (xvii)

As Gilman points out, writing about Shepard can be a challenging endeavor; but even with all of the thematic and dramatic discord that Shepard's work creates, certain themes emerge throughout the course of his ongoing career: familial relationships, male-female relationships, the role of the artist in society, the individual's connection to his past, to name a few of the more prominent issues that Shepard critics discuss.

Shepard criticism is further complicated by the sometimes blatant connection between Shepard's plays and the man himself. Many critics (Stephen Bottoms, Ron Mottram, Ellen Oumano, and Don Shewey, to name just a few) provide a sort of chrono-biographical approach, analyzing Shepard on a play-by-play basis, often using details from Shepard's own life to lend insight into his works. In fact, as Susan Abbotson argues, "Many critics find it difficult to explain Shepard's plays without referencing the life of the man who created them. His plays are not necessarily autobiographical, they just often seem more accessible through the lens of their creator's life and experience" (293). Abbotson makes a good point; so much of Shepard's material seems deeply rooted in his own experiences. It becomes difficult to separate the man from his work, and identifying connections between Shepard's life and his plays is a fruitful endeavor. But this project will attempt to minimize references to Shepard's personal life. Instead, the focus here will be on Shepard's examination of the individual American's reaction to the inaccessibility of American identity.

The most dominant subject in Shepard criticism is his focus on American culture. His plays are consistently described as inherently American; indeed, Shepard does

seem concerned with a question that has remained central to American literature since its inception: What does it mean to be an American? Ron Mottram argues that Shepard's "method of representation" (his dramatic strategy, so to speak) operates through "a flexible social criticism that explores the simultaneous alienation and integration of the individual in American society" (ix). Ellen Oumano, in an important early Shepard biography, similarly suggests that "Shepard personifies our cultural ambiguity" (1), again pointing out the tensions and contradictions located at the heart of all Shepard's plays. And Bonnie Marranca, in her oft-cited collection of essays on Shepard, *American Dreams*, admits that while Shepard's writing is "too renegade" to be explained by "conventional dramatic wisdom," "very few American dramatists have been able to unite personal and national consciousness in so startling and intense a manner" (ii).

More recent criticism (from the 1990s) tends to agree with earlier critics. Taking into account the ever-expanding Shepard corpus, critics note the development of Shepard's dramaturgy, but essentially maintain the same position on Shepard's examination of a paradoxical American identity. (This can be explained in good part by Shepard's consistent treatment of that American identity. While his writing skills have evolved and sharpened and his thematic and metadramatic concerns have naturally expanded through his career, to this point Shepard has not resolved the central issue of the conflict between personal and national identity.) Echoing the sentiments of the criticism from the 1980s, Laura Graham identifies the tension between individualism and socialization that emerges throughout Shepard's career as a central element of his work. And one of Shepard's most recent biographers,

Stephen Bottoms, similarly argues that “Shepard’s writing can often be seen as representing an unresolved conflict between modernist and postmodernist perspectives on such issues as the nature of self-identity, the search for coherence and meaning in late capitalist culture, and the creative process itself” (ix).

While critics may differ on some of the specifics of Shepard’s depiction of the tension found in American identity,³ all agree on Shepard’s preoccupation with the notion of an inherent American ideology. And almost uniformly, they identify Shepard as “the latest Great American Playwright” (Wade, *Shepard* 1). Such accolades seem to indicate that not only is Shepard accorded an elevated status as a great playwright in the American literary canon, he also is explicitly linked to American character itself. Don Shewey labels Shepard “a true American artist” (5); Wynn Handman, the American Place Theatre’s artistic director, describes Shepard as a “conduit that digs down into the American soil and what flows out of him is what we’re all about” (qtd. in Wade, *Shepard* 2). And Leslie Wade asserts that Shepard’s plays “may be viewed as artifacts that document contemporary American history. [...] his plays somehow speak to an American experience that lies deep within the nation’s cultural memory” (*Shepard* 2).

The titles of the critical books and essays on Shepard suggest his connection to a distinctly American experience as well. Ellen Oumano calls her work *Sam Shepard: The Life and Work of an American Dreamer*. Bonnie Marranca similarly uses the title *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*. In his article for the *New*

³ Graham argues that a split exists in the nature of Shepard’s examination of identity. The early plays deal with the self-creation of the individual identity and his later plays address “socialization subsequent to failed individuation” (17); while Bottoms asserts that Shepard examines the same

York Times, Michiko Kakutani's focus is "Myths, Dreams, Realities: Sam Shepard's America." And Pete Hamill's article on Shepard is called "The New American Hero."

Shepard's examination of and relationship to American culture is a constant topic in Shepard criticism.

But the treatment of "Shepard's America" is often incomplete and indefinite. While often discussed, this topic proves as difficult to pinpoint conclusively as the rest of Shepard's themes. Due to the fragmented, inconsistent and often chaotic manner in which Shepard deals with the question of what is an American, critics often cite Shepard's tendency toward contradiction as the answer to that question. Stephen Bottoms' informative *The Theatre of Sam Shepard* (1997) exemplifies this approach to Shepard's work. He argues that Shepard's entire career can be viewed through the lens of his predilection for conflict and discord. Bottoms asserts that "Shepard's work is dominated, and indeed distinguished, by patterns of internal tension and contradiction, by loose ends and uncertainties, which—far from obstructing the plays' creation of meaning—operate to generate a plethora of possible meanings" (ix). So the contradiction becomes an integral part of the meaning of the work. Bottoms acknowledges that his "approach here is a provisional one, which seeks simply to posit certain lines of inquiry, and to follow through the logic of that starting position" (xi). So while recognizing the paradox of identity that confronts the American in Shepard's plays, Bottoms leaves the final analysis an open-ended exploration into Shepard's work, which he suggests is appropriate for plays that "end

tension throughout his career, and that Shepard continually explores "questions which remain unanswered, or even unanswerable" (3).

not in resolutions but with abrupt anticlimaxes, unexplained images, or the suggestion of tensions continuing indefinitely into the future. They do not restore equilibrium”

(3).

Bottoms’ comments echo Richard Gilman, who similarly argues,

Most of his plays seem like fragments, chunks of various sizes thrown out from some mother lode of urgent and heterogeneous imagination in which he has scrabbled with pick, shovel, gunbutt and hands. The reason so many of them seem incomplete is that they lack the clear boundaries as artifact, the internal order, the progress to a denouement (of some kind: a crystallization, a summarizing image, a poise in the mind) and the consistency of tone and procedure that ordinarily characterize good drama, even the most avant-garde drama of the postwar time. (xvii-xviii)

Undeniably, both Gilman and Bottoms are correct in their analysis of Shepard’s work.

Shepard’s consistent use of contradiction and irresolution serves as an overriding theme through his career.

But Shepard’s examination of American culture and identity reveals a linear progression in his treatment of American character that belies the myriad contradictions that populate his plays. Shepard’s characters do exhibit progress; they undergo distinct shifts in their relationship to American identity. This project will attempt more closely to examine Shepard’s characters’ still-evolving connection to American character, and how their reaction to the notion of a national identity manifests itself in overwhelming and conflicting impulses of escape and return.

A deliberate shift occurs in Shepard’s treatment of the escapist impulse around the time of his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Buried Child*, where his characters undergo a radical transformation, seeking to confront the identity they previously desperately hoped to escape. This shift in the character’s mentality represents a new direction in Shepard’s work (one which even his most recent work addresses): his depiction of

how his characters react to and coexist with an inherently American identity changes drastically as they begin to recognize the futility of denying the influence of their personal and national past (a history that must be exposed to the harsh light of reality). Only once America has acknowledged its “true” past will it be able to remove the stain that currently mars national character and that forces its citizens into a self-destructive and futile quest for identity.

Shepard’s efforts to examine the reductive and exclusionary image he associate with American identity seem to correspond with Nina Baym’s assessment of prevailing American literary criticism. She argues, “If one accepts current theories of American literature, one accepts as a consequence...a literature that is essentially male” (Baym 1148). Although Baym’s argument focuses most directly on the exclusion of women authors from the canon, her argument extends to minority writers as well—essentially anyone who is not “white, middle-class, male, [and] of Anglo-Saxon derivation” (1150) is left out. American literary critics have generally evaluated the nation’s literature according to a text’s “Americanness,” a standard for which the critics “have some qualitative essence in mind” that makes a work inherently and distinctly American. Ultimately, this “search for cultural essence [...] has identified a sort of nonrealistic narrative, a romance, a story free to catch an essential, idealized American character” (1151). Therefore, any literature or literary criticism that measures “Americanness” by some cultural essence fails to accurately represent the diversity and experiences of the nation.

Baym’s criticism of an American essence seems to mirror Sam Shepard’s own attempts to expose the illusory nature of American identity as he sees it. His plays

and writings consistently problematize the extremely masculine vision of an American character that derives its essence from man's relationship to the land and his ability to create his own fortune based on that connection to the land. His characters, such as Wesley from *Curse of the Starving Class* and Eddie from *A Fool for Love*, often articulate a desire to reconnect to the land as a way of recovering a sense of identity. (Wesley, for instance, believes that the land can grant him access to a larger community of American farmers, as he reveals when he suggests that he and his father join the California Avocado Association). Thus, many of Shepard's characters aspire to achieve the same limited and illusory image of "The American," an image that seems to correspond with Baym's criticism of an American essence: "Thus it is that the essential quality of America comes to reside in its unsettled wilderness and the opportunities that such a wilderness offers to the individual as the medium on which he may inscribe, unhindered, his own destiny and his own nature" (Baym 1152). This "essential quality of America," as Baym repeatedly points out, "has always been known to be delusory" (1152).

But Shepard's characters must learn this the hard way, engaging in a futile and self-destructive quest to attain this idealized American. Through the course of his playwriting career, Shepard's characters have undergone a development: they begin to recognize the impossibility of achieving their vision of national identity, and instead attempt to confront its limiting and fallacious nature by identifying its inherent inaccuracies. Through this development of his characters, Shepard exposes the notion of a national character as fundamentally flawed and illusory—even the middle-class white Anglo-Saxons cannot attain it—much in the same way that Baym

exposes the “melodrama of beset manhood” that has dominated the consciousness of American literary criticism. Significantly, it is Shepard’s women who emerge as the characters who disillusion the men. In *Fool for Love* May rejects Eddie’s idealized vision of American life, screaming “You keep comin’ up here with this lame country dream life with chickens and vegetables and I can’t stand any of it” (25). And in *Simpatico*, Cecelia explains to Carter that “‘Americana’ bores the shit out of me” (38). Shepard’s women become the catalysts for dispelling the myth of an achievable American identity.

However, Shepard also seems to buy into the concept of a collective identity that can unify the nation and that makes us distinctly American, thus reinscribing the notion that an essential American identity is possible. Throughout his career, he refers to an “essence of myth” that can serve “as a story in which people could connect themselves to the present and the future,” and which is “so powerful and so strong that it acted as a thread in culture,” as he describes it in an interview with Carol Rosen (“Territory” 5). But the essence of myth that Shepard attempts to evoke represents a far more inclusive bid at communal identity, one that attempts to incorporate elements that extend well beyond the limiting paradigm of “beset manhood,” to use Baym’s term. While Shepard’s exploration of this essence of myth is not fully formed, its inclusion of Native American elements and its increased role for women indicate that Shepard is aware of the limitations inherent in the vision of American identity that his characters—and Shepard himself—have struggled with for decades.

Chapter One begins by examining Shepard's vision of American identity. Shepard argues that America itself promotes an idealized image of American-ness that obscures the reality of life in America. This type of "advertising," as Shepard puts it, occurs through the nation's culture (especially pop culture) and history. Elements of this national character are present in the nation-forming literature that arose around the Revolutionary War. Authors and statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson and Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur deliberately constructed an ideological model of "the American." This image becomes reinscribed by the nation's popular culture, which has promoted the pioneer-cowboy in spectacles such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West extravaganza and Western films, and by the nation's history, wherein America's leaders routinely evoke images of pioneers and new frontiers. This model figure, to which all Americans should, and in Shepard's opinion *must*, aspire, consists of certain fundamental principles that he argues have become associated with the nation itself.

First and foremost, this national identity is inextricably bound to the land. For Shepard's characters, land ownership provides status, the promise of economic prosperity and a sense of belonging to a larger community. It is more than just a place to live—the land creates a deep connection between the individual and the nation.

Another element of American identity that surfaces in the nation's literature is the concept of the self-made man. In America, it is supposed to be possible for the individual to control his own fate, to create his own successful destiny through his actions. This ideology of self-sufficiency has become an American literary

institution. Some of the most overt portraits of the self-made man include Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories about downtrodden individuals rising to the height of American success and W. D. Howell's rather cynical *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Through such portrayals of success through individual effort and ingenuity, the American self-made success story became ingrained in American identity.

Chapter Two elaborates on the escapist impulse that pervades Shepard's work, identifying it as a distinctly American characteristic. Although this escapist tendency does not manifest itself in the same way in each character, some larger patterns of escape do emerge from Shepard's plays. Some of his characters seek to escape to a mythic frontier, a "True West," an unspoiled land "full of possibilities" (as Wesley articulates it in *Curse of the Starving Class*). These characters (including Cody and Fingers from *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* and Lee and Austin from *True West*) feel that a place exists where they can reconnect with the land and rediscover their lost pioneering identities. Other Shepard characters are more concerned about what they are escaping from than where they are escaping to. These characters seek to escape one of two situations (and often both, although the characters themselves may not realize it): they either desire a literal escape from U.S. geographical borders (Kent in *La Turista*, Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Henry in *Seduced*) or an ideological escape from stereotypical constructions of an American identity (Niles and Paulette in *Suicide in B-Flat* and Hoss in *The Tooth of Crime*). Whatever their professed reasons for attempting to escape, all efforts toward escape are precipitated by a sense of disillusionment with the America in which they live.

For all of these “escape artists,” however, escape is ultimately impossible. None of the characters ever achieves his goal, no matter what type of escape he strives for. And the characters themselves are often destroyed in the process. Shepard’s plays suggest that American culture perpetuates the false image of American identity in its literature, its culture and its history, persistently holding out the promise that a fundamental American ideology is attainable. Essentially, then, the very nature of our nation evokes an escapist impulse in the individual—everyone wants to escape, but no one can.

Chapter Three signals the shift in Shepard’s focus from escape to confrontation. Identifying *Buried Child* as the key transitional play, this chapter argues that Shepard’s characters begin to recognize the overwhelming and inevitable influence of a man’s individual and national past on his sense of identity. Beginning with *Buried Child*, Shepard’s characters start to realize the futility of denying heritage; willingly or unwillingly, they are forced to confront the inescapable nature of American identity that is a formative part of all Americans. Shepard’s work from this point on suggests that the individual cannot break away from that national identity, because to do so is a denial of the past, on both an individual and a national level, that has helped define both man and country. Examining some of Shepard’s later plays—*True West*, *Fool for Love*, *A Lie of the Mind* and *States of Shock*—Chapter Three illustrates Shepard’s assertion that the individual and the nation must acknowledge their violent and exclusionary past so that it will be possible to rediscover a sense of national identity. Shepard’s characters begin to admit to the violent reality of their past, confessing their transgressions in a crucial step toward the recovery of identity.

Chapter Four will examine the state of an America that has been stripped of its national myth. Shepard argues that the myth must be replaced by another, some collective identity that unites its citizens as “Americans.” While allowing for new possibilities in the construction of American identity, Americans must also retain an “essence of myth” (to use Shepard’s own term) that evokes a connection to the land and the past. To this point in his career, Shepard has not been able to wholly move beyond his limited vision of American identity. In Shepard’s plays and writings since *State of Shock* (*Simpatico*, *Eyes for Consuela*, *The Late Henry Moss*), he has depicted an America that still has not recovered its identity, but remains optimistic about the potential for positive renewal of a national character.

Chapter One

“The Cowboy Shape on the Floor”: The Construction of American Identity

The Myth of the Frontier is our oldest and most characteristic myth, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual, historiography and polemics produced over a period of three centuries. According to this myth-historiography, the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity. (Slotkin 10)

Cowboys are really interesting to me—these guys [...] took on this immense country and didn't have any real rules.—Sam Shepard (Chubb et al. 190)

Sam Shepard's admitted fascination with the cowboy and the west permeates his entire literary corpus. Certainly, Shepard delves into other thematic concerns. Many of his plays, such as *Fool For Love* (1983) and *Lie of the Mind* (1985), demonstrate his interest in male-female relationships; he focuses on familial interaction, particularly father-son relationships, in *Rock Garden* (1964), *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *Fool for Love* and *The Late Henry Moss* (2001), to name just a few. He also examines the role of the artist in society and the creative process in plays such as *Tooth of Crime* (1972), *Angel City* (1976), and *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974). Shepard experiments with music in *Suicide in B-Flat* (1976) and *Operation Sidewinder* (1969); he investigates the influence of the past in many of his plays, including *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Simpatico* (1994), *Buried Child* (1978) and *States of Shock* (1991). His interests are clearly diverse.

But Shepard most consistently examines what he considers the prevailing American identity, an image that he often represents with the figures of the cowboy, pioneer and/or farmer (often elements of these three figures blur together in Shepard's work). And many of the themes mentioned above will be shown to be directly related to his exploration of American identity. For Shepard, the American is not defined by merely living within America's borders; rather, American identity is formed through specific principles that Shepard perceives as integral to national character.

The Super Cowboy Man: Shepard's Conception of American Identity

Shepard's plays are populated with cowboy-heroes (who are not always heroic) who illustrate his preoccupation with the divisive and destructive influence of an illusory and fictitious national identity. In a May, 2000, interview, Shepard commented at length on his interest in exposing the deleterious effects of national identity on individual citizens. He explains,

Nobody has actually ever succinctly defined "the myth of the American Dream." What is the American Dream? Is it what Thomas Jefferson proposed? Was that the American Dream? Was it what George Washington proposed? Was it what Lincoln proposed? Was it what Martin Luther King proposed? I don't know what the American Dream is. I do know that it doesn't work. Not only doesn't it work, the myth of the American Dream has created extraordinary havoc, and it's going to be our demise. (Roudané 69-70)

While Shepard clearly takes a negative view of the concept of a defining vision of what America supposedly represents, he continually creates characters who feel pressure (or desire) to achieve a sense of national identity. His plays suggest that although the "myth of the American Dream" is never succinctly defined, it often manifests in certain overriding principles. Shepard's plays reveal two important

elements that he perceives to be at the heart of American identity: a strong connection to the land and the belief in an individual's self-sufficiency and ability to make his own way (frequently represented as the self-made man). These two components constitute the "animating myths," to use C.W.E. Bigsby's term, that lie at the heart of a national consciousness. These animating myths draw "their strength and credibility from a predominantly rural world in which the individual's responsibility for his own fate and identity was an article of national no less than individual faith" (Bigsby, *Introduction* vii). Within this context, the individual's identity is directly connected to national identity, an argument that Shepard consistently supports in his plays and writings.

The complexity of the concepts of the land and the self-made man runs deep in American literature. In much of Shepard's work, the American's connection to the land plays a major role in creating the individual's entire identity. The land serves several important functions: it is a wild territory to be tamed by the pioneering spirit (as seen in such historical movements as Manifest Destiny), and then made to serve man's agrarian purposes. The ownership of land shows permanency (roots), status, and self-sufficiency. Land is also important because it represents the ability to produce something (with a man's own two hands) from that land. To make something grow—to make the land produce for you—is more than just a means of sustenance; the farmer is at the heart of American identity.

In a 1994 essay entitled "The Self-Made Man," Shepard offers an extended description of that term. It emphasizes the importance of man's connection to the

land, along with the role of self-determinism in forming his vision of American character.

For him, it began in a moment of shattering stillness. Something separated and fell away. Instinctively his heart understood this “something” was the long-cherished notion of himself as a distinct individual; an American entity called “The Self-Made Man.” He’d learned it through generations of irascible ancestors with the same hard-set jawline and gnarly nose. He had pictures of them on his stone mantel. Tintypes going back to the Civil War of his great-great-great-grandfather; a man called Lemuel P. Dodge. Who lost an ear fighting for the North, an arm fighting for the South, and was finally hanged for “womanizing” in Ojinaga and dragged through the dusty streets until his head separated from his torso. There were others: men with long beards and wide-brimmed straw hats, standing three abreast atop giant hay wagons, wooden pitchforks in hand, almost biblical against the prairie sky. Railroad men riding cowcatchers, waving derbies; blasting their way through granite mountains; unstoppable in their absolute conviction of Manifest Destiny. (*Cruising* 3)

Shepard’s description of the self-made man, which comes from his 1996 collection of stories and autobiographical recollections entitled *Cruising Paradise*, reveals much about his perception of American identity. In such descriptions, he argues that a narrative of identity exists, one that operates on a familial and a national level. The men (and, as this project will discuss, it is the American male’s (dis)connection with this identity that Sam Shepard explores most directly) that Shepard describes possess an unwavering belief in their ability, and their absolute right, to make their way in America. Shepard is depicting a lineage that seemingly embodies America: a strong tie to the land and an indomitable belief in the self-sufficiency and capability of American character.⁴ The account of these prior generations serves to interweave the family and the nation in such a way that they cease to be separate entities. The individual grandfathers become identified by their roles in America’s history (and

⁴ Shepard’s characters’ relationship to these qualities, particularly their reactions to the pressure to achieve these qualities, will be discussed in detail in chapters three and four.

often by the violence of those roles), as soldiers and pioneers, men who held an “absolute conviction” in the appropriateness of their actions. Indeed, for Shepard’s self-made man this identity becomes a religious experience, “almost biblical.”

But these same lines reveal the powerful sense of loss that Shepard argues Americans experience in modern day society. The stable concept of the self-made man “separated and fell away.” Shepard’s American will continually seek to recover this “long-cherished notion of himself as a distinct individual” which he believes is a uniquely “American entity.” For the most part, they will be unsuccessful. Shepard’s characters’ attempts to come to terms with this realization—that their familiar vision of American identity is ultimately inaccessible—is a theme that Shepard examines throughout his expansive career.

In Shepard’s work, American character is most often represented by the figure of the cowboy, an image which Shepard both admires and castigates. While he continually returns to the image of the cowboy in his plays, it is a figure that he treats ambiguously. The cowboy is often presented as the idealization of American identity, and Shepard’s characters constantly seek to reconnect with the pioneering spirit embodied within that figure. But Shepard recognizes that this American identity exists more in illusion and memory than reality. His plays and prose continually illustrate the artificiality of a narrative of the nation that now functions as a destructive force, as Americans attempt to achieve an identity that has been constructed with myths and half-truths. Shepard portrays the cowboy as an incomplete representation of national character. He characterizes an extremely

masculine American identity that is inclined toward violence, and at the same time he exposes its artificial and constructed nature.

Numerous Shepard characters embody this “complete” American identity. While they attempt to achieve an idealized model of the pioneer/cowboy that (as Shepard argues) America’s literature, history, and culture perpetuates, they often unwittingly reveal the complete (and more negative) image of the American. One of Shepard’s most explicit and revealing representations of American character appears in “Montana.” This short story, from a collection of Shepard’s stories, poems, and monologues entitled *Hawk Moon* (1973), paints a portrait of the ultimate cowboy, dressing in a New York hotel room:

Pulled out his favorite cowboy gear: Kangaroo skin boots in white with red flower designs and a high riding heel. Big rawhide chaps with fringe and silver Navajo studs. A black satin Gene Autry shirt with white pistols embroidered on the collar and cuffs. His favorite bright orange Roy Rogers bandana. His Lone Ranger mask. And a black stetson hat with a chin string. Finally he pulled out the golden spurs with silver chains and leather straps. He laid them all out on the floor in a right order so they looked like the shape of a man. The Super Cowboy Man. (21-22)

The Super Cowboy Man’s costume seeks authenticity but is blatantly contrived.

Almost every article of clothing the Super Cowboy Man dons is culled from pop culture icons and B-grade Westerns. The image Shepard creates of the clothes laid out “so they looked like the shape of a man” further emphasizes the constructed nature of that particular identity; the picture of a “cowboy shape on the floor” gives the impression that an individual need only step into the shape to become the image (22). Shepard’s language suggests the artificiality of this cowboy identity.

The incongruity of the Super Cowboy Man is further emphasized by the specific details of his costume. Silk shirts and kangaroo skin boots conflict with the rugged

persona of the cowboy. His outfit bears a resemblance to Scratchy Wilson from Stephen Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898), the last-of-a-dying-breed "genuine" cowboy who wears shirts "which had been purchased for purposes of decoration and made, principally, by some Jewish women on the east side of New York" (Crane 765). The Super Cowboy Man's mode of transportation seems oddly inappropriate as well; instead of swinging onto his horse and galloping off into the sunset, "he walked out to hail a cab...He swung in with his spurs jangling and said: 'Montana please'" (Shepard, *Hawk Moon* 23). Every aspect of the Super Cowboy Man belies the authenticity of his status as national emblem.

The Super Cowboy Man also displays a strong, inevitable tendency toward violence. "Montana" opens with this ultimate cowboy placing hundred-dollar bills on the corpse of a woman he has just killed. His indifferent attitude toward his own violent actions exemplifies the inseparable association of violence with his (and by extension, America's) identity. After he pasted the bills "with a vacant feeling" (21) and goes to the bar for a drink, Super Cowboy Man returns to the room, places the body in the bathtub, covers it with gasoline, and lights the pyre, "leaving nothing but bones and teeth on the white porcelain" (23), before leaving in a cab for Montana. His own horrific actions elicit no sense of remorse; he remains "cold and empty" as he commits violent atrocities (23). This desensitization (and inclination) toward violence will become a repeated trait in Shepard's characters.

This propensity for violence, Shepard suggests, is an integral part of the masculine construction of American identity, and will resurface in the majority of Shepard's plays. Shepard's men are aggressive and hostile, and often wield weapons.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, Jake nearly beats his wife Beth to death, leaving her mentally disabled. In *True West*, Lee attempts to strangle his brother Austin with a phone cord. In *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, Jasper and Jason blast their way into a hotel room with shotguns, killing three. And guns are present in *Cowboy Mouth*, *Suicide in B-Flat*, *Seduced*, *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *A Lie of the Mind*, *States of Shock*, *Tooth of Crime*, *Operation Sidewinder*, *Mad Dog Blues*, *The Unseen Hand*, *Fool for Love*, *La Turista*, and *Cowboys #2*, amongst others, works that span Shepard's entire career. Shepard's proclivity for creating (male) characters who exhibit such violent behavior, while also embracing the ideals of American identity, demonstrates his association of national character with violence and aggression.

Shepard's Super Cowboy Man exposes an American character rife with fundamental flaws: the prevailing image of the pioneering American is violent and inauthentic. Shepard argues that the violence has often been either de-emphasized or glorified by America's history and culture, which results in an acceptance of those violent tendencies. And the artificiality of Shepard's Super Cowboy Man reveals its disconnection from any true American heritage. Shepard's cowboy consists of a pastiche of filmic images that bears little resemblance to the reality of life in the West, past or present.

What is an American?: The Construction of American Identity

In recent interviews, Shepard has overtly argued that America's very culture is responsible for presenting and promoting a national character that is ultimately

inaccessible to its citizens. In a 2000 interview, he offers acute insight into the difference he perceives between American identity in cultural narrative and historical reality:

I mean if you want to—and I’m not an historian—but it’s very interesting to trace back this European imperialism, this notion that not only were we given this land by God, somehow, but that we’re also entitled to do whatever we wanted to with it, regardless of the consequences, and reap all of the fortunes out of the land, much to the detriment of everybody “below” this rampant, puritanical class of European colonialism...Granted, Lewis and Clark and these other guys were somewhat heroic, they were vigorous, they had all of this vitality and they had all of this adventure of going into strange territory and all of that stuff, but behind the whole thing is land-hungry Europeans wanting to dominate. That’s behind the whole deal [...] I think we’ve always fallen victim to advertising from the get go. From advertising campaigns. The move westward was promoted by advertising. You know, “Come West!” “Free land!” “Manifest Destiny.” So we’ve always been seduced by advertising [...] We’ve fallen into that thing, you know. So the American Dream is always this fantasy that’s promoted through advertising. We always prefer the fantasy over the reality. (Roudané, “Interview” 70)

Shepard’s comments reveal his belief in America’s culpability in promoting and perpetuating a false myth, one that cannot ever be attained yet is held out as an American ideal. American citizens are “seduced by advertising,” propaganda that emerges in some of the nation’s literature, its view of American history, and perhaps most importantly for Shepard its popular culture. While Shepard admits that “there are so many definitions of the myth of the American Dream” (70), his vision of American identity continually refers back to Americans’ claim to the land and their unswerving faith in their ability to prosper through that land. Shepard’s plays and writing continually challenge the validity of these “American” principles, yet (as will be shown) he also cannot fully disconnect from this vision.

For Shepard, this paradox of national identity creates discord and discontent. His characters’ failings largely stem from their fallacious and incomplete image of

American character. While Shepard's characters progressively become more aware of their paradoxical and potentially self-destructive situation as they search for identity, only his more recent characters show any evidence of arriving at a stage where they can actually recover it. Their struggle to achieve this state of understanding becomes a focal point of Shepard's drama; his plays illustrate the constant attempts, and failures, to attain the vision of the hardy, pioneering American, a vision that is predominately constructed of illusion and myth rather than any grounding in reality. This deceptive image glorifies its pioneering spirit and unbounded potential for success while de-emphasizing its violent tendencies and its overall inaccessibility. Shepard argues that this image of national identity imposes itself upon the individual, making any true discovery of identity nearly impossible.

American Identity in Literature

Shepard's concept of American identity was, of course, not created in a vacuum. He is responding to a long-standing, deep-rooted image of "the American" that is documented in the nation's literature as well as its culture and history. Shepard's comments about America's European roots seem to recall the nation-forming literature that emerged during the formative years around the Revolutionary War. The writers who produced materials during this time were transplanted Europeans who attempted to recreate their identity to embrace the ideals of a new nation. They helped to ingrain a narrative of a nation that, as Sam Shepard suggests, still resonates in contemporary society. Many American writers consciously attempted to create not only a sense of patriotism, but also to establish a national identity for its citizens to

embrace as an American ideal.⁵ Writers such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur produced literature that also served as historical document (works like Franklin's *Autobiography* show that literature and history are sometimes interchangeable). Aware of America's status as a newly created country, these authors sought to construct nation-forming literature that would document a model American. Much of this literature seems to fall squarely into the category of promotional advertising, as these authors attempted to sell a specific vision of American identity.

Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur created perhaps the most overt connection between the "American" and his land. His 1792 publication, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America* (the title of which immediately emphasizes the fundamental importance of the land to an American), contains an entire letter entitled "What is an American?" In this chapter, and throughout his letters and sketches, Crèvecoeur continually enumerates the values of land ownership, revealing it as a source of identity for Americans. Crèvecoeur's very opening sentence, part of a letter to a friend in Europe, instantly connects him to the land as he hails his friend: "Behold, sir, an humble American planter, a simple cultivator of the earth" (37). Soon after, the importance of the land to Crèvecoeur and to American identity is revealed in its full magnitude:

The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence, exalt my mind. Precious soil, I say to myself, by what singular custom of law is it that thou wast made to constitute the riches of the

⁵ Obviously, American literature has experienced many significant movements which have helped define the culture and the nation. Civil War literature, slave narratives, realism and naturalism, and Modernism—just to name a few—have all contributed to the image of America. But the literature that emerged from the period around the Revolutionary War occupies a unique position at the forefront of an emerging nation.

freeholder? What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil? It feeds, it clothes us; from it we draw even a great exuberancy, our best meat, our richest drink; the very honey of our bees comes from this privileged spot. No wonder we should thus cherish its possession; no wonder that so many Europeans who have never been able to say that such portion of land was theirs cross the Atlantic to realize that happiness. This formerly rude soil has been converted by my father into a pleasant farm, and in return, it has established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance as inhabitants of such a district. These images, I must confess, I always behold with pleasure and extend them as far as my imagination can reach; for this is what may be called the true and the only philosophy of an American farmer. (54)

Crèvecoeur's lines reveal more than just the "philosophy of an American farmer"; they reveal part of a philosophy of America itself. The land provides more for the American than merely the sustenance produced on the farm. It becomes explicitly associated with status, freedom, and self-reliance on a general level, and on a more specific level land becomes the root of the American citizen's rights. It also becomes a means of distinguishing America from other countries. Land ownership (and the privileges thereof) becomes such a basic element of American identity that it was written into the Constitution itself to determine fundamental civic liberties such as voting rights.

As Crèvecoeur suggests in his letters, the attachment to the land and the sense of identity that accompanies it are distinctly American phenomena.⁶ He argues that although Americans differ depending on the region of the country in which they live (coastal inhabitants, for example, are "more bold and enterprising" than inland dwellers), they are all defined by the very land they occupy: "Men are like plants; the

⁶ Certainly, the importance of land is not restricted to the United States, but the land occupies a prominent position in the American image, one that is recognized worldwide. Shepard himself recognizes other nations' global association of America with its landscape. In *Cruising Paradise* (1996), Shepard recounts a conversation on a train with a Swedish woman who tells him, "I used to

goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow” (71). While Crèvecoeur does not dismiss other relevant factors in the creation of the individual character, such as “the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment” (71)—all of which can be argued to relate to the notion of land ownership—it is significant that Crèvecoeur identifies the land, along with “the air we breathe” and the “climate we inhabit” (71), as the primary influence in the construction of our character, both as individuals and as national citizens. His tendency to employ nature analogies further emphasizes the substantial importance of the natural world in the formation of an American’s identity.

Crèvecoeur’s comments about the individual being shaped by the land he comes from are similar to Shepard’s own observations about his connection to the place where he grew up. During his self-imposed three-year exile in England, Shepard gained a new perspective on his homeland. In a 1974 interview (while still living in London), he says, “I mean it wasn’t until I came to England that I found out what it means to be an American. Nothing really makes sense when you’re there, but the more distant you are from it, the more the implications of what you grew up with start to emerge” (Chubb et al. 198). Shepard asserts that the individual’s connection to place even affects speech patterns: “I have a feeling that the cultural environment one is raised in predetermines a rhythmical relationship to the use of words. In this sense, I can’t be anything other than an American writer” (Shepard, “Language” 52).

Although Shepard does not directly discuss the importance of the land here, his own

have visions about [the West]. [...] We see that great landscape in our dreams. It haunts us. [...] That vast background” (178).

connection to the land emerges from his answers to repeated questions about his ties to the American West:

I just feel like the West is much more ancient than the East. [...] [T]here are areas like Wyoming, Texas, Montana and places like that, where you really feel this ancient thing about the land. Ancient. That it's primordial. [...] It has to do with the relationship between the land and the people—between the human being and the ground. (Lippman 10)

Shepard's articulation of the land's significance as an identity-shaping force reinforces Crèvecoeur's comments from over 300 years earlier. Both men emphasize the American's connection to the very soil beneath his feet.

Crèvecoeur's emphasis on land and nature appears in other literature from the period. Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (originally published in 1781), provides an exhaustive account of the plant and animal life in the state, as well as a detailed description of the terrain, including mountains, rivers, and waterfalls. Jefferson also exhorts America to maintain its agricultural identity. In a chapter entitled "Manufactures," Jefferson urges the nation to focus its attention on producing from the land, leaving manufacturing and factory production to Europe:

While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. [...] It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. (216)

Like Crèvecoeur, Jefferson directly connects the ideology of the nation with the geographical land that constitutes America's borders.

The landscape that Crèvecoeur and Jefferson exalt plays an important role not only in terms of its agricultural values of sustenance and production; it also represents an

untamed wilderness that can be explored and mastered by man. This pioneering sense of expansion and domination—making the land suit man’s purposes—forms an integral element of American ideology.⁷ While Crèvecoeur spends much of his writing praising the agrarian lifestyle, he also played an instrumental part in codifying the image of the pioneer as a national icon. In an effort to escape from the horrors of the Revolutionary War, Crèvecoeur and his family abandon his farm, an act he deeply regrets, not only for the loss of the farmland, but also because he tamed the land himself. Reflecting upon his discarded property, Crèvecoeur laments,

Perhaps I may never revisit those fields which I have cleared, those trees which I have planted, those meadows which, in my youth, were a hideous wilderness, now converted by my industry into rich pastures and pleasant lawns. If in Europe it is praiseworthy to be attached to paternal inheritances, how much more natural, how much more powerful must the tie be with us, who, if I may be permitted the expression, are the founders, the creators, of our own farms! (*Letters* 216)

Crèvecoeur’s language (which again illustrates the deep connection between an American and his land) portrays him as trailblazer who came, saw the land, and conquered it, transforming the landscape into something useful for his purposes. This idealized image of the frontiersman, as Leo Lemay has pointed out, becomes a recurring figure in American literature. While not suggesting that Crèvecoeur was solely responsible for the elevation of the pioneer to national status, Lemay argues that “he first [...] interprets American society and culture according to a model that aggrandizes the role of the frontier and the frontiersman” (Lemay 197). The frontiersman comes to represent the hardy, pioneering stock of Americans that was

⁷ It is this sense of the potential of the frontier that Shepard will continually return to in his plays. Much like Huck Finn, Shepard’s characters often yearn to light out for the territories as an idealized vision of American existence. And it is this impulse that will compel Austin to long for a life on the

busy building a nation; as such, in much of the literature of Crèvecoeur's time, as well as in the generations of American literature that followed, "the frontiersman is often a hero and always a unique American phenomenon" (193).

Although Crèvecoeur's main theme in his *Letters from an American Farmer* focuses on the importance of the land, for physical survival as well as ideological identification on an individual or national level, his writings also reveal the other primary attribute that Shepard sees as integral to the image of American identity: the self-made man. Crèvecoeur's *Letters* exemplifies the American success story: he has built his own farmland, raised a family, and acquired financial wealth and property. Crèvecoeur tends to suppress his comments on his personal success, but passages from his letters reveal that, as a good American, the accumulation of wealth and property is never far from his mind. Early in *Letters*, Crèvecoeur establishes the merits of financial success in subtle but distinct ways. In a discussion about preparations for "a week's jaunt in the woods," for example, Crèvecoeur states that he is going to hunt bees, not deer or bears. His motivation to do so is almost purely financial, as he admits: "I cannot boast that this chase is so noble or so famous among men, but I find it less fatiguing, and full as profitable; and the last consideration is the only one that moves me" (*Letters* 59).

Along with the acquisition of wealth, Crèvecoeur stresses the accumulation of property—specifically land—as a primary goal of the "new colonist," a.k.a. the American. Crèvecoeur asserts that even those who already hold property will sell it in order to get more of it:

desert, and instill a desire in Wesley to escape to Alaska, the last remaining frontier, because "it's full of possibilities. It's undiscovered" (*Curse* 163).

Let us view now the new colonist as possessed of property. This has a great weight and a mighty influence. From earliest infancy we are accustomed to a greater exchange of things, a greater transfer of property than the people of the same class in Europe. [...] This man, thus bred, from a variety of reasons is determined to improve his fortunes by removing to a new district and resolves to purchase as much land as will afford substantial farms to every one of his children—a pious thought which causes so many even wealthy people to sell their patrimonial estates to enlarge their sphere of action and leave a sufficient inheritance to their progeny. (*Sketches* 254)

The acquisition of property, then, becomes a central concern for the American, as it provides him not only with a secure inheritance for his family (the primary social unit), but it also provides him with a visible testament to his wealth, which equates directly to reputation and social prestige. Crèvecoeur makes this connection explicit in his *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, as he points out that the American's "wealth and, therefore, his consequence increase with the progress of the settlement" (261). Wealth and property become major determiners in the definition of the self-made, self-sufficient man that in part constitutes American identity. They create the appearance of success that confirms the achievement of the individual citizen's quest to embody an American character.

By detailing his own successful accumulation of wealth and property, Crèvecoeur offers himself as a model to be emulated by Americans. Not only does he wish to teach his children the values of the American life he espouses, but he consciously intends to provide his accounts at least in part for the edification of others. In his opening letter to a European friend, Crèvecoeur justifies his writings by asserting that "the sentiments I have expressed are also the echo of those of my countrymen" (*Letters* 38). Crèvecoeur also provides specific examples of the American success story (of which he is one), including a lengthy account of the "history of Andrew, the

Hebridean,” in which a man comes to America with nothing and, through “sobriety, honesty, and industry” (91) acquires land, wealth, and status. Such illustrations speak to the heart of American identity, where a man may rise from obscurity to attain the dream. Crèvecoeur argues that such an opportunity exemplifies life in America:

From nothing to start into being; from a servant to the rank of a master; from being the slave of some despotic prince, to become a free man, invested with lands to which every municipal blessing is annexed! What a change indeed! It is in consequence of that change that he becomes an American. (83)

Although Crèvecoeur himself never had to start from nothing, his *Letters* become a testimonial to an American ideal. His overt efforts to create a sense of national identity compels critic Arthur Stone, who edited an edition of *Letters*, to claim that “American literature, as the voice of our national consciousness, begins in 1782 with the first publication in England of *Letters from an American Farmer*” (Stone 7).

Crèvecoeur’s effort to provide a model for others to emulate exemplifies Sam Shepard’s assertion that America employs “advertising campaigns” (Roudané 70) to promote a specific vision of national identity. While he does not directly refer to Crèvecoeur, Shepard does argue that “the American Dream is always this fantasy that’s promoted through advertising” (70), and Crèvecoeur’s work certainly seems to fit that description. And while his *Sketches* is illustrative of American “advertising” that Shepard decries, he is not the only individual to use literature to endorse an image of American identity. Ben Franklin’s *Autobiography*, for example, also consciously attempts to create a text to serve as a blueprint for American success. Franklin clearly announces his intentions in the opening letter to his son, wherein he states,

Having emerg'd from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the world, and having gone so far thro' Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the conducting Means I made use of, which, with the Blessing of God, so Well Succeeded, my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, and therefore fit to be imitated. (Franklin 1)

Despite Franklin's professed modesty, his autobiography endeavors to provide a model of American success, much like Crèvecoeur's text does. The two authors do not necessarily focus on the same aspects of American identity: D. H. Lawrence notes that "Franklin is the real *practical* prototype of the American. Crèvecoeur is the emotional" (24). But both men promote the ability of the American to achieve personal success, to make the celebrated and oft-documented rise from rags to riches. Both writers intend to answer the question that Crèvecoeur poses in the title of his third letter: "What is an American?"

Sam Shepard's characters cannot successfully answer that question. They constantly strive for the same goals of wealth and property; however, they are almost uniformly denied access to these aspirations. His characters, unlike literary figures such as James the American planter (Crèvecoeur's representative of the idealized American identity), are not positive models to be emulated by future generations; rather, they are incompetent failures who are unable to achieve any sense of prosperity and consequently unable to embody their perception of American identity.

While Shepard never overtly references Crèvecoeur in his plays, he demonstrates a clear awareness of the impact of the farmer/pioneer as a dominant image of American character. His plays are populated by characters who either aspire to be farmers (Eddie in *Fool For Love*, Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class*), or those

who have failed at that attempt (Weston in *Curse*), or those who seek to recapture the pioneering spirit that built the nation (Wesley, Henry Hackamore in *Seduced*).

What's Wrong with this Picture?

Of course, Shepard's vision of national character is rife with historical inaccuracies. Numerous critical works have been written which expose images of a single, unified American identity as untenable. Gerald Kreyche, for example, points out that while the image of the pioneer/cowboy "helped produce [...] a new, virtually unique and authentic man—a *homo Americanus*" (Kreyche 3), it was far more conflicted than unified:

The rise of the West thus was characterized by a series of contradictory drives—toward subjugation and freedom, exploitation and exploration, destruction, conservation, and liberation. Understood as a dialectical struggle attempting to produce a new synthesis, the process offers endless polarities. Among these opposing forces were Roman Catholic and Protestant, white man and red man, American and Mexican, Gentile and Mormon, farmer and cattleman, Irish and Chinese, Indian tribe and Indian tribe, and above all, man and nature. (5)

Kreyche accurately observes that there is more contradiction than consensus within the image of American character as portrayed by the Westerner.

Aside from the numerous inconsistencies inherent in this vision of American character, such a view of national identity also belies the myriad experiences of a diverse nation of people whose stories are often marginalized or ignored altogether by the notion of a single concept of "the American." Jane Tompkins, in her study of Western films, notes that the genre focuses almost exclusively on white males: "Indians are repressed in Westerns—there but not there—in the same way women are" (Tompkins 9); thus any non-white character is portrayed as Other, if he/she is

portrayed at all. Similarly, in his exhaustive examination of the frontier “as the founding myth of the American nation” (Wallmann 7), Richard Slotkin discusses the violent and repressive manner in which America carved out its identity. He argues, “Violence is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation. The Anglo-American colonies grew by displacing Amerindian societies and enslaving Africans to advance the fortunes of White colonists” (Slotkin 11).

Beyond the omissions, revisionist efforts, and embellishments that many critics have addressed regarding American identity, even the fundamental principles to which Sam Shepard continually returns (the importance of the land and the notion of the self-made man) at times lack historical authenticity. In his seminal *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith effectively debunks the image of American identity that Shepard often evokes. In this work, he traces the diverging identities that evolved both in literature and history. Drawing heavily from James Fennimore Cooper’s works, Smith argues that the earliest literary representations of the pioneer/frontiersman portray him as an antihero who retreats into the wildness of nature in an attempt to escape from civilization: “The aged Leatherstocking has likewise [like the actual Daniel Boone] ‘been driven by the increasing and unparalleled advance of population to seek final refuge against society in the broad and tenantless plains of the west’” (Smith 59-60). Huck Finn-like, these early frontiersman do not represent an American ideal so much as societal outcasts.

As the image of the frontiersman develops, Smith argues that Westward Expansion created three major divisions in society: “a remote fringe of backwoods

settlements, a central region of comfortable farms, and to the East, a region of growing wealth, cities, and social stratification” (126-127). According to Smith, the middle division is the most significant in terms of being elevated to the level of national myth. It is within this “central region of comfortable farms” that the agrarian ideal was founded, one that emphasized the role of the land (and the individual’s ability to acquire and successfully farm/work that land). Men such as Thomas Jefferson help promote this ideal; in his own state of Virginia, he proposed that every “landless adult” be given 50 acres from public land because “he saw the cultivator of the earth, the husbandman who tilled his own acres, as the rock upon which the American republic must stand” (128). The American’s connection to the land is firmly imprinted into the narrative of the nation.

But, as Smith details, the image of the agrarian American cannot be so simply categorized. Smith contends, “By 1830 there were thus two agrarianisms in the place of one, and their inherent opposition to one another was to become clearer with each passing decade until it reached a climax during the 1850’s in the contest for control of the territories beyond the Mississippi” (133). In the North, the agrarianism developed as the freeman tilling his own soil, whereas the South developed a plantation system based on the slave labor of others (133). The contradiction inherent in these two contrasting images of agrarianism is obvious, and would be one of the factors that would drive the conflict that culminated in the Civil War.

Even with such apparent discontinuity in this agrarian image of American ideal, future incidents in American history contributed to its indoctrination into national character. Smith points to the Homestead Act of 1862 as a major factor:

The strongest appeal of the homestead system to the West, an appeal which had touched the deepest levels of American experience in the nineteenth century, lay in the belief that it would enact by statute the fee-simple empire, the agrarian utopia of hardy and virtuous yeoman which had haunted the imaginations of writers about the West since the time of Crèvecoeur. (170)

Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier hypothesis," as Smith labels it, also added to the formation of an agricultural and pioneering American identity. So even though the notion of an American ideal is complex and problematic, it continues to permeate American consciousness.

As complicated as the actual evolution of the agrarian/frontiersman was in American history, for Sam Shepard the promoted images of that identity have often been oversimplified versions that ignored the realities. His claim that Americans have "fallen victim to advertising from the get go," especially regarding Westward Expansion—"You know, 'Come West!' 'Free land!' 'Manifest Destiny'" (qtd. in Roudané 70)—indicate his awareness of the fallacious nature of American identity. In this respect, he echoes Henry Nash Smith's belief that idealized images of the American farmer and frontiersman, while inaccurate, can nevertheless dominate the citizenry's perception of national identity. Smith argues, "In view of the actual conditions in the West, the ideal of the yeoman society could be considered nothing but a device of propaganda manipulated by cynical speculators" (248). While Smith and Shepard may not attribute such "propaganda" to the same sources, the similarity in their language bears noting. Both the words propaganda and advertising connote ulterior motives and deliberate deception. And both men seem to realize that while these images of American identity may be false and incompletely depicted, they are also powerful forces on society.

Surely, Shepard is aware of the inaccuracies of his characters' vision of American identity. His comments about the American dream—that “we always prefer the fantasy over the reality—suggest he does recognize his characters' inaccurate concept of national character. Yet he keeps returning to the same elements of it—specifically the American's connection to the land and his ability to make himself successful by tending to that land. Perhaps his point is that society as a whole culls its concept of national identity from broad and sometimes inaccurate sources—the advertising to which he refers.

He is a thoroughly postmodern dramatist in the respect that he draws from a multitude of sources, offering bits and pieces of literature, history and pop culture to create a collage of images that constitute his Super Cowboy Man. The image of American identity that Shepard constructs certainly contains inaccuracies, but that does not mean that it does not resonate for his characters (and for Shepard himself as well). Shepard has most likely never read Henry Nash Smith, or Jane Tompkins, or Richard Slotkin. It is likely that many people in his audiences have never read them either. But they (and Shepard) have been exposed to countless images that advertise (to return to Shepard's term) American identity—images that have appeared in movies (Shepard refers to the final scene of *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* as the “Sam Peckinpah sequence,” for instance [Bottoms 104]), dime store novels (Henry Nash Smith argues that the formulaic nature of dime novels represent “an objectified mass dream” that expresses “the dream life of a vast inarticulate public” [Smith 91-92]), TV shows (in his prose works, Shepard often refers to TV characters such as the Lone Ranger and Gabby Hayes) and songs (Shepard's connection to and interest in

rock and roll is well documented; he even wrote “Brownsville Girl” with Bob Dylan). In fact, one of Shepard’s most celebrated and oft-discussed images originated from a comic book. In her 1986 biography of Shepard, Ellen Oumano reveals the source of Shepard’s eagle/tomcat image, as retold by Scott Christopher Wren, who participated in a playwright workshop conducted by Shepard:

Wren relates a story in which Ruby Cohn, the foremost Beckett scholar in the world, was lecturing about the final image of *Curse of the Starving Class*, in which an eagle and a cat battle for the testicles of a chicken⁸ that have just been chopped off. The eagle grabs the cat and they’re both in the air, tearing at each other’s guts, and then they fall to the ground: “Ruby went on this whole stemwinder about how this image is at the center of the play and of his whole work, and Shepard is sitting there in his chair, smiling. The smile is getting bigger and bigger. Finally she asks him, ‘How was it this image occurred to you?’ Shepard laughed and said, ‘Remember those old adventure comic books?’ He’d gotten this from one of those things. Everyone in the room cracked up.” (Oumano 135)

In a later interview, Shepard confirmed this story, and added that the image partly came from his own experiences on a farm: “When you castrated ram lambs, there would always be a hawk or something around” (Rosen, “Territory” 3). But this anecdote illustrates that Sam Shepard’s influences are decidedly pop culture-based.

As C.W.E. Bigsby concluded,

Shepard was the first playwright to construct his drama out of the materials of the popular arts, to infiltrate the sounds and images of popular culture into work which rendered up its meaning less to those who approached it with an analytic mind than to those who chose to inhabit its images and respond to its rhythms on an emotional or visceral level. (Bigsby, *Modern* 171)

These are the sounds and images from which Shepard draws his material, and he argues that it is images from pop culture that perpetuate the flawed construct of national character. In historical reality, the figures of the farmer, cowboy, pioneer,

⁸ Although either Oumano or Wren misidentifies the castrated animal as a chicken, it is actually “spring ram lambs” that Weston references in the eagle/tomcat story (Shepard, *Curse* 182).

frontiersman, and yeoman are distinct, discrete entities. But in Shepard's works these figures are conflated into the Super Cowboy Man, a composite character who will continue to resurface in plays throughout Shepard's career.

Presidents and B-Grade Westerns: The Influence of History and Popular Culture

While America's literature has been instrumental in shaping images of American identity, Sam Shepard draws more heavily on the nation's history and popular culture. Shepard incorporates an abundance of pop culture elements into his plays, and his interest in pop culture's impact on contemporary society is well documented. He infuses his work with "pop stereotypes" and "the debris of pop Americana," routinely "drawing on a hugely eclectic range of pop-cultural sources" (Bottoms 77). And plays like *Mad Dog Blues* contain so many cultural references that one critic labeled it "clearly an American play, and only an imagination that has grown on American movies, radio shows, pulp magazines, and music could have conceived it" (Stambolian 83).

The pop culture references Shepard most often employs are drawn from the cowboy West. His plays take place in deserts and on farmland and ranches, and his characters tend to embody the spirit of the cowboy, and often are costumed and depicted as cowboys who are real (Jesse James in *Mad Dog Blues*) or mythic (Pecos Bill in *The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing His Wife*). Shepard, discussing his love of the Western figure, once wrote,

I keep praying
for a double bill
of

BAD DAY AT BLACK ROCK
and
VERA CRUZ (*Motel* 86)

It bears noting that Shepard himself seems to buy into many of the same principles as his characters: he lives on a ranch in Minnesota (Senior 46) and participates in rodeos (Shepard once remarked in an interview that “the first team roping that I won gave me more of a feeling of accomplishment and pride of achievement than I ever got winning the Pulitzer Prize or anything”[Lippman 12])). His choices in movie roles also tend to reflect his sentiments. Many of his film characters are down-on-their-luck farmers, a figure that Shepard can play with amazing verisimilitude; during a film shoot for *Country*, for instance, a crewmember commented on Shepard’s on- and off-screen image:

“You see that Sam Shepard?” still man Dean Williams says. “My father was a farmer. And my father lost his farm, just like the farmer in this movie. And when I see Sam coming down the road in that truck, or I see him walking around the fields, or just eating lunch, I swear, I feel like crying. ‘Cause this guy is a *farmer*. I mean, I know he’s a great writer, I know he’s a movie star and all that. But when I look at him, he’s a farmer. And he makes me want to die.” (qtd. in Hamill 75)

The fascination Shepard and others exhibit for the farmer or for the cowboy way is not a new phenomenon. The multitude of Westerns generated by Hollywood provides a strong indicator of the continued vitality of the cowboy myth as American ideal. And long before celluloid images began captivating audiences, the public flocked to spectacles such as Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Extravaganza. Wild West shows, especially Cody’s, were enormously popular; during the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, Cody ran his show “twice a day, ‘every day, rain or shine’ [...] before a covered grandstand that could hold eighteen thousand people” (White 7). These

traveling productions essentially commodified the image of the cowboy-as-hero, a pioneer who carves out his destiny by conquering the land (and those who lived upon it) and making it serve his purposes.

Cody's cowboy incorporates certain characteristics that will appear in Shepard's characters as well. Specifically, Cody understood the violence that is inherent in American identity. He directly connects America's development through Westward Expansion with force and bloodshed. But Cody does not apologize for the pioneer's aggressive behavior; in fact, he revels in it, arguing that "the bullet is the pioneer of civilization, for it has gone hand in hand with the axe that cleared the forest, and with the family Bible and school book" (qtd. in Grossman epigraph). Cody's acceptance—even glorification—of American violence not only served to justify it, but also helped establish it as a national characteristic.

Cody's attempts to create authenticity for his production further imprint the "truthfulness" of the image of the cowboy as an icon of America. He would never refer to his extravaganza as a show, which might "have suggested it was something less than a true story" (Grossman 2).

Images of the pioneer-cowboy also emerge from America's history, further legitimizing the frontier identity as a cornerstone of national character. Long after the close of the frontier, marked by Frederick Jackson Turner's famous 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," the ideology embodied in the pioneer and the images of the frontier continue to pervade American consciousness and affect its historical perspective. Turner's main argument was that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American

settlement westward explain American development” (qtd. in Smith 250). Turner’s thesis, which offered a justification for Westward Expansion, “has been worked into the very fabric of our conception of our [American] history” (Smith 250).

Certainly, the ethnocentric and imperialistic nature of Turner’s thesis has long been exposed. Patricia Limerick astutely observes that

Turner was a scholar with intellectual courage, an innovative spirit, and a forceful writing style. But respect for the individual flowed over into excessive deference to the individual’s ideas. [...] The old Turnerian model of Anglo-Americans purposefully moving westward provided no help. The new Indian history alone rendered old course outlines untenable [for historians and teachers]. (Limerick 21-22)

This limited and exclusionary image of the American pioneer clearly overlooks historical realities such as America’s mistreatment of Native Americans (something Shepard works such as *Operation Sidewinder* and his film *Silent Tongues*—address). Yet the persistence of that oversimplified model of American identity inherent in the frontier West perpetuates its mythic status.

And between Turner and Buffalo Bill, the myth of the frontier became a symbol for America. Although they never actively worked together, these two historical figures’ individual efforts to capture and document the essence of the American West (an essence which would, in Shepard’s mind, ultimately become a representative image for all of America) succeeded in sustaining the frontiersman principles that have their inception in the earliest American literature (Slotkin).⁹ While Turner and Cody differed drastically in some of their depictions of the frontier (Turner, for instance, portrayed westward settlement as the mostly peaceful acquisition of free

⁹ For a detailed examination of the roles of both Buffalo Bill Cody and Frederick Jackson Turner in helping to perpetuate the myth of the West/frontier and elevating that myth to the level of national

land, while Cody glamorized the violent nature of the conquest of land), they both elevated the notion of the frontier to a mythic national status. Historian Richard White, who helped create an exhibition at the Newberry Library entitled “The Frontier in American Culture,” notes that their impact was so pervasive that

by the early twentieth century there was no way to tell stories about the West, no way to talk about an American identity, without confronting either Buffalo Bill or Turner. They had divided the narrative space of the West between them. [...] Turner and Cody followed separate but connected strands of a single mythic cloth. (Wright 45)

The persistence of these pioneering images of self-reliance becomes evident, as they continue to appear throughout contemporary culture.

Other key historical figures have linked the frontier myth to American identity. As Limerick and others have pointed out, more than one presidential campaign has been waged and won by invoking the values of self-sufficiency and pioneering spirit. John F. Kennedy’s “New Frontier” platform drew heavily from America’s pioneering past. And Ronald Reagan’s second inaugural address similarly proclaimed the importance of the frontier to American character: “the men of the Alamo call out encouragement to each other; a settler pushes west and sings his song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air. It is the American sound” (qtd. in Limerick 324). And the fact that presidents as diverse in ideologies as Kennedy and Reagan have called upon the frontier identity as the foundation for national identity suggests that the mythic nature of the frontiersman/cowboy overrides political and ideological differences.¹⁰

identity, see Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation* or Richard Wright’s “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill.”

¹⁰ For a more detailed examination of the lasting power of the frontier and the frontiersman, see Limerick’s *The Legacy of Conquest* or Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation*.

And perhaps no president exploited the frontier image more than Teddy Roosevelt, whose public image personifies many of the characteristics of the American cowboy. His deliberate effort to represent the pioneering spirit as national identity reveals the power of the frontier long after any such land actually existed. Roosevelt's persona proved that "manliness did not stop being a heroic ideal when the frontier closed. [...] Roosevelt's example of the manly resonated through American culture and took up residence in the myth of the frontier that has so dominated the popular imagination for the whole of the twentieth century" (Clark 19). America's very history, then, has often promoted and perpetuated the notion of a single national identity, one founded on principles of the American's connection to (and control of) the land and his rugged, self-sufficient capability. Some of America's presidents, who literally represent the elected voice of the people and thus of the nation, have actively reinscribed those principles, elevating them to a national ideal as well as an individual goal. Every American should (and, according to Shepard, *must*) aspire to achieve a national identity.

Presidents are not the only historical figures that perpetuate the frontier myth. The cowboy/gunman has also long captivated America's attention. Men such as Billy the Kid, Jesse and Frank James, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and Doc Holliday, just to name a few, often have been glorified rather than castigated for their crimes. Each of these men was a violent, murdering criminal, yet each also occupies a mythologized position in American history. The glut of Western films that pay tribute to these individuals suggests the reverence with which they are treated. Even

respected historians such as Gore Vidal have entered into the arena—he wrote the screenplay for *Billy the Kid* in 1989.

These cowboy-heroes appear throughout Shepard's work. Jesse James plays a major role in *Mad Dog Blues*, a character named Cisco is called upon to save the world along with his cowboy brothers in *The Unseen Hand*, and a myriad of cowboys recur in plays spanning Shepard's career, including *Fool for Love*, *Cowboys #2*, and *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*.

The Super Cowboy Man becomes a fixture in Shepard's plays, which are populated with characters seeking to live out an idealized American frontier life a century after the official close of the frontier. The notion of the frontiersman, which will become the model for the cowboy that fascinates Shepard and recurs as a character throughout Shepard's career, emphasizes the correlation between two primary elements of American identity. While the pioneer clearly has a direct connection with the land, he also must embody the concept of the self-sufficient, self-made man if he is to conquer that land. The untamed territory that spread out to the West offered Americans the opportunity to embrace a burgeoning national ideology of self-sufficiency that draws its strength from the landscape. As a nation, "our fanatical faith in self-reliance was confirmed by the experience of the frontier," which "contributed to the shaping of a uniquely American attitude" (Porter 17). Thus, in the figure of the frontiersman/cowboy, Shepard finds the model for his ideal American—rugged, self-sufficient, capable, and able to tame the wilderness in order to make the land work for him, the cowboy embodies the fundamental principles of American character.

But throughout his playwriting career, Shepard will attempt to expose a complete picture of American identity, one that is not so ideal. His plays reveal a national character that is predominately built on illusion rather than reality. Since American identity presents false images, it will remain inaccessible to Americans who strive so desperately to achieve it. It is this paradox of identity that will lead Shepard's characters to engage in a continuous pattern of escape and return, a fruitless and self-destructive cycle that even Shepard's most recent plays address.

Chapter Two

“The Nature of a Nation”

I've got no nostalgia about the place. “Americana” bores the shit out of me. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Who are they kidding? I went straight to London and never looked back. (*Simpatico* 38)

One of the most consistent elements of Sam Shepard's work is his continual creation of characters who feel compelled to escape. Cecilia, the character from *Simpatico* (1994) who expresses this disdain for the America she describes, reveals an instinctive urge to flee that emerges as a distinctly American characteristic. Cecilia comes from Independence, Missouri, of all places—“Home of Harry Truman,” as she explains to Carter (37). Yet for all her assertions that she has escaped both American soil and American ideologies, Cecilia tells this to Carter while they're sitting in San Dimas, California, U.S.A. Cecilia's desire to escape exposes an American paradox: Americans must continually strive to achieve a vision of American identity that is inaccessible, and they will often destroy themselves in the process. This paradox of American identity—in which the individual cannot attain any semblance of a national character, yet cannot stop seeking it—becomes a central theme in Shepard's early works, from his first full-length play (1967's *La Turista*) up to his Pulitzer-Prize winning *Buried Child* (1978).

Through this period of his career, Shepard argues that this paradox controls the individual's quest for identity, creating an incessant escapist impulse that his characters must carry out. These escape attempts, however, are both futile and self-destructive: they cannot move beyond a model of the pioneering American because

America's culture and history perpetuate this image, creating a narrative of national character which is elevated to a mythical status as an idealized vision of the American.

Often instinctually, but at times deliberately, Shepard's characters constantly seek to flee their current misery and achieve a better existence. This escapist impulse reappears in Shepard's work throughout his career. Examples are abundant: in *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, Cody is kidnapped, yearns for a return to "the space I need" (285-86), and is ultimately rescued by Cody's real-life cowboy brothers, who take him back home to Wyoming. In *Angel City* a play about avoiding reality by losing oneself in the movies, Rabbit attempts to persuade other characters to break away from their current misery by suggesting that "If one of us escapes, we all escape" (85). And in one of Shepard's well-known "family plays," *Curse of the Starving Class*, each member of the Tate household speculates about getting out of the house and the family: daughter Emma wants to escape to Mexico; father Weston also wants to go to Mexico, but without the rest of his family; mother Ella dreams of selling the house and moving to Europe; and son Wesley is attracted to the frontier of Alaska, which he claims is "full of possibilities. It's undiscovered" (163).

Unable to reconcile their perception of American identity with the reality of life in America, Shepard's characters desperately seek to escape from their current situation and find a better life by achieving a semblance of the proffered American character. In this better place, Shepard's characters believe they can reconnect with the land and with themselves, finding the identity that they have lost. But whatever the desired destination, the illusion of American identity they cling to is ultimately unachievable

because, according to Shepard's plays, this place (and the identity it embodies) no longer exists, if in fact it ever did. Their image of the model American is incomplete and therefore inaccurate. And the characters who refrain from constructing this false vision of an achievable American identity—who instead attempt to deny their national (and personal) heritage—will also ultimately fail, because separating from that past is just as self destructive as embracing a false one. So his characters become caught in an impossibility: they cannot survive where they are and the place they look to is nothing more than an inaccessible and false vision. In Shepard's plays, escape is not only impossible, but also an irrepressible impulse.

Even more significantly, Shepard's work suggests that this escapist impulse is a specific response to life in America. American culture—through consumerism, pop culture, and America's own history (all of which are critiqued in Shepard's plays)—helps create and perpetuate the ideology of "the American," so that the animating myths behind American identity get reinscribed into a modern society that cannot relate to those myths.

Unable to reconcile this identity paradox, Shepard's characters instinctually attempt to flee in a desperate and futile effort to abandon their failed lives. This escapist impulse manifests itself in two contradictory behaviors (although both are direct responses to life in America). Some of Shepard's characters attempt to break away from America and its attendant ideologies. Shepard's plays are replete with "escape artists," characters who are always looking to leave. Shepard's characters proffer a multitude of explanations for wanting "to just disappear for a while" (*Turista* 257), citing understandable reasons such as vacations (Kent) and trouble with

the law (Weston). But whatever their professed motivation, the characters' very instinctual impulse to flee from the land is precipitated by an underlying disillusionment with the America in which they live. What begins as an urge physically to flee U.S. geography often develops into an implicit (and at times explicit) escape from American character. Each character either intentionally or unwittingly reveals a deep dissatisfaction with the promise America is supposed to hold for him. For Shepard's characters, the hardy, self-sufficient, pioneering American is more fiction than reality, a burnt-out memory of a time (and spirit) that is noticeably absent from their present lives..

The second contradictory behavior exhibited by Shepard's characters exposes the alternative to escaping American identity. These figures attempt to escape their current moribund existence by embracing their vision of America, believing in the possibility of acquiring some land and making their fortunes. Even though these characters, such as Weston from *Curse of the Starving Class*, Cody from *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, and Vince from *Buried Child*, already live in America, they feel dislocated from the fundamental principles that they perceive at the center of American identity. But they also feel that these principles can be recovered, and that their own sense of individual identity and self-worth will be restored along with them.

But, according to Shepard, both impulses are futile and self-destructive: Americans can neither successfully escape nor embrace American identity. Although Shepard's characters achieve varying levels of success at learning how to function as an "American," none of them ever wholly reconciles the disparity between the illusion of national identity and the reality of life in America. For Shepard, American

identity is a pyrite promise—America, through its culture and its history, holds out a gleaming dream of an American image that turns out to be nothing more than fool's gold.

Yet even though attempts to escape or embrace American identity are futile, Shepard's plays argue that both impulses are also impossible to resist. Up through *Buried Child*, Shepard's characters inevitably gravitate toward one impulse or the other, constantly searching for the "essence of myth" that Shepard argues has been lost in American culture.¹¹ Shepard believes that society has lost "the ancient meaning of myth" which "served as a story in which people could connect themselves in time to the past. And thereby connect themselves to the present and the future" (Rosen, "Territory" 5).¹² Since modern society has lost this essence, Americans will continue desperately but fruitlessly to seek reconnection. Or they will endeavor to discard their outmoded vision of national character, attempting to escape American identity altogether. Shepard (it seems, at least) offers little in terms of a way out for his characters.

"Just Keep Yourself Movin'": *La Turista*

Shepard declares his resistance to resolution of the paradox of American identity in his very first full-length play, *La Turista* (1967), in a remarkably overt fashion. Kent, the protagonist, exemplifies the escapist impulse that polarizes Shepard's

¹¹ Even some of Shepard's post-*Buried Child* characters continue to exhibit this escapist tendency. As this chapter's opening quote from the more recent *Simpatico* (1994) indicates, characters still express disillusionment with American life. Shepard's account of the escapist impulse, however, changes drastically, as chapter three will argue.

¹² This "essence of myth" can provide a source of connection that modern Americans lack, Shepard argues. Shepard's exploration of myth's potentially redemptive powers is discussed further in chapter four.

American. At the beginning of the first act, he engages in a literal flight from America's borders. Ostensibly on vacation in Mexico, Kent's physical removal from American soil hardly seems worth notice. Like thousands of Americans each year, Kent could simply want to experience a new locale for a while. And his lament over his predicament (he's contracted dysentery, known by the locals as "La Turista") suggests an ordinary response to an unfortunate but by no means unusual situation: "Relaxation is the thing you seek. You spend thousands of hours and dollars and plane rides to get to a place for relaxation. To just disappear for a while. And you wind up like this. With diarrhea" (257). But through these same lines, Kent also intimates that the relaxation he seeks is something that cannot be obtained in America. And more than merely looking to get away, Kent wants to disappear entirely. When his sister Salem asks him what he would do if he did disappear, he simply replies, "Nothing. I'd be gone" (257). Kent shows no interest in *going* anywhere—he simply wants to be away from where he is.

The connection between Kent's escapist desires and the disillusionment in America that this signifies for him is made more explicit later in the play. After recovering a bit from his gastrointestinal ordeals, Kent rails against an America that breeds such weak and susceptible people:

Yes, sir! Nothing like a little amoebic dysentery to build up a man's immunity to his environment. That's the trouble with the States you know. Everything's so clean and pure and immaculate up there that a man doesn't even have a chance to build up his own immunity. They're breeding a bunch of lily livered weaklings up there simply by not having a little dirty water around to toughen people up. Before you know it them people ain't going to be able to travel nowhere outside their own country on account of their low resistance. An isolated land of purification. That's what I'd call it. Now they got some minds, I'll grant you that. But the mind ain't nothing without the

old body tagging along behind to follow things through. And the old body ain't nothing without a little amoeba. (265)

Kent's diatribe, while certainly an atypical complaint about America (after all, not many citizens of any land would bemoan its superior hygienic conditions), directly contradicts the image of a pioneering, hardy stock of Americans who tame their environment rather than succumbing to it. Kent implies that while American society has progressed admirably in terms of its intellectual and technological achievements, it has stagnated physically. The body of the individual, and of the nation, is weak and disease-prone, a far cry from his (its) pioneering past. So Kent's diarrhea may signify much more than an individual condition. It also suggests a breakdown of American character. The pioneers who tamed America's wild land have been replaced by men who cannot exist outside their comfortable, sterile environment.

This type of physical weakness is not exclusive to Kent and Salem (who later contracts dysentery as well); rather, diseased/ailing bodies appear throughout Shepard's career. Henry Hackamore in *Seduced*, who can barely move and claims to be dying, asks, "Has my body poisoned my mind along with everything else?" (240). Bradley in *Buried Child* is an amputee and walks around "*with an exaggerated, almost mechanical limp*" (82). Rabbit, among others in *Angel City* mutates, his skin turning "*slimy green; he has fangs, long black fingernails, and a long, thick mane of black hair*" (108). And in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Wesley brings a maggot-infested lamb into the family kitchen. While each character/incident certainly has its own context, each also will come to suggest something about the state of American character in modern society.

Kent's purification speech moves into the realm of prognostication when he predicts severe consequences because of America's neglect of the body. According to him, once the land becomes isolated, "where there's no one coming in and no one getting out," it will crumble: "The land will fall apart. [...] Low resistance! The population shrinks. The people die away. Extinction! Destruction! Rot and ruin! I see it all now clearly before me! The Greatest Society on its way downhill" (266). Kent feels disconnected from both the land and the nation. Believing what he does about America, it comes as no surprise to the audience that he desperately wants to disappear—he portrays a dying nation that seems to defy entry or escape.

Kent's own attempts to flee are both earnest and dramatic. Removing himself from America's physical geography is only the first step in an increasingly intense struggle to escape. Next, he changes costumes. Significantly, he does this just before delivering his oratory on America's sterilization. Kent reappears from the bathroom wearing a "*straight brimmed Panamanian hat, a linen shirt, handmade boots, underwear, and a pistol around his waist*" (265). The outfit resembles exactly the ensemble described by a young Mexican boy moments before, when the boy was telling Salem about a movie he was in featuring a "cool cat" whose composure and strength impressed him. The boy compares the man to "a jaguar or ocelot. They look very together and calm. Like you could walk up to one and just pet him gently on the nose and feel his silky fur, but you don't do that because they have something else going on that you're not sure about. Something hidden somewhere" (264). Immediately after the boy finishes describing the quiet cool of the movie man's

strength and self-sufficiency, Kent steps out wearing the same costume, but without any pants.

The comical impact of Kent's image sharply contrasts with the persona the boy depicts, and highlights that Kent may be able to change his clothes, but he cannot erase his true identity. He will remain one of those "lily livered weaklings" that he claims America breeds. Kent's ridiculous outfit highlights his impotence in the role of the ideal American. Armed but not dangerous, Kent poses no threat; indeed, immediately after reappearing in his new guise, declaring himself "a new man" (265), and delivering his purification speech, Kent sees the boy lying in his hotel bed, screams, and faints. The strong-armed exterior (an unconvincing, pantsless one at that) cannot mask the lily-livered weakling underneath. For Shepard, the clothes do not make the man. This scene may also comment on the role of pop culture in promoting false visions. While the cool cat in the movie projects a strong, capable image, Kent's own appearance inspires impotency and ridicule.

Kent attempts to distance himself even further in his purification speech by referring to America as "up there," and using the non-self-inclusive "they" to describe Americans. But semantics and costumes cannot help Kent escape his American identity. Kent's pantsless performance exposes him as the same pathetic man he used to be, and his actions reinforce this truth. Upon being spit upon by the young boy, Kent screams hysterically "He spit! He spit! He spit all over me. Oh my God!" (260) and runs from the room, where he can be heard groaning offstage. Weak and timid, Kent is a product of his American heritage, which has lost its "essence of myth" as a strong, pioneering spirit capable of mastering its surroundings.

Kent's next escape attempt is a psychological one. Act two takes place in America; Kent's dysentery is gone but a more serious illness afflicts him. Diagnosed by an American doctor as having "chronic Encephalitis Lethargica, also known as sleepy sickness" (280), Kent's mind retreats from the reality around him. Shepard's stage directions make this disconnection explicit, as he calls for Kent's lines to be read as though "*he is in a world unrelated to anything on stage, even when he talks to the other actors and even when his dialogue seems coherent to the action around him*" (281). Doc, along with his son/aide and Salem, attempts to bring Kent back by controlling his very character, verbally constructing an identity for him. The moment develops into a Frankenstein-esque scene where Doc attempts to create his perfect man but instead produces a monster. In a rapid-fire exchange of dueling dialogue, Doc explains his intentions in reviving the sleepy-sickness stricken Kent, while Kent replies with his own version of the events.

DOC: The doctor performs the experiment with his faithful son at his side and transforms the dying man into a thing of beauty.

KENT: How?

(DOC *advances on KENT*)

DOC: By beginning slow. From the hair down. Piece by piece. Peeling the scalp away neatly. Carving out the stickiness and placing cool summer breezes inside. In place of the hair goes a grassy field with a few dandelions falling toward the back.

KENT: And the eyes?

DOC: Wet spongy moss covers each one and opens into long tunnel caves that go like spirals to the back where the light pours in. The nose swoops down and has crows and chickadees roosting all day on its tip. The doctor's scalpel moves quickly over the mouth.

(KENT *advances on DOC*)

KENT: Oh no. The mouth hangs in strips for lips that droop all the way down to the chin. And underneath are thick round teeth with edges sharper than diamonds, so they flash at night when he's eating. The flashes warn everything living within twenty miles, and they stay inside until morning comes. (291)

When Doc purports to be creating a “thing of beauty” to replace the dying man, Kent counters by revealing the grotesque nature of the unnatural monstrosity that Doc constructs. Significantly, Doc’s creature is comprised entirely of elements of land and nature. Constructed from grassy fields, crows and mossy grass, Doc’s creature is an aggregate of natural parts intended collectively to create Kent’s character.

Doc’s own character connects him directly to American identity, which further emphasizes his attempt to impose a sense of national character on his creature.

Shepard’s specific stage directions indicate Doc should be “*dressed like a country doctor from Civil War times, with boots, a coat with tails, string tie, suspenders, a pistol carried in a shoulder holster, wide brimmed black hat, and a large black satchel with supplies*” (*Turista* 277).

Two important images emerge from Doc’s appearance, and both show up consistently in Sam Shepard’s plays. First, Doc’s Civil War garb links him directly to America’s past. Shepard’s obsession with the past, on both the individual and nationalistic levels, emerges in his plays and his writings as a crucial element in determining one’s identity. In *Cruising Paradise*, Shepard opens with the story of a man who is beginning to realize both his personal and national heritage. He recalls looking at pictures “going back to the Civil War of his great-great-great-grandfather. [...] There was a connection there he felt, more real than imagined” (3-4). This connection becomes more overt with Doc’s outfit.

Secondly, Doc’s costume reveals another of Shepard’s consistent associations with American identity: violence. The gun Doc wields is a recurring prop in Shepard’s plays, and Shepard’s propensity for violence in his stage productions has

been discussed at length.¹³ Shepard himself admits “I think there’s something about American violence that to me is very touching. [...] I can’t put my finger on it, but it’s the source of a lot of intrigue for me” (Kakutani 126). For Shepard, violence is an inextricable part of American identity, and Doc’s outfit serves as a reminder that will resurface in later plays.

Ultimately, though, Doc is unable to control Kent. The thing of beauty Doc desired to create exists more in his imagination than in reality. Kent resists the identity being thrust upon him, and weaves a tale of the monster’s escape. As the monster in Kent’s tale eludes his captors/creators, Kent similarly avoids the efforts of Doc, Sonny, and Salem to catch him, running around and even off the stage to avoid restraint. In Kent’s speech, the monster begins literally to deconstruct, destroying the image that Doc has created. Much as idealized images of American identity cannot sustain themselves, Doc’s aggregation of parts cannot hold together, and the image collapses. As Kent runs around the stage, he describes the monster’s decomposition, saying “His arms rip from the shoulders and chest, and juices gush out down his sides. [...] His hair tears and floats away. [...] His teeth drag him up. Dragging the body along. Pulling and chomping down on the earth” (297). The identity that Doc attempts to impose upon Kent cannot be maintained, and quite literally falls apart.

Kent’s reaction to Doc’s character-shaping efforts typifies the response of Shepard characters to American identity. Due to his dissatisfaction with the state of America, Kent’s every instinct is toward flight. Immediately upon describing the self-destruction of the monster, Kent himself commits his final escapist act, this one

¹³ For a more detailed analysis of Shepard’s incorporation of violence, see Carla McDonough’s *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama*, pp. 35-69.

physical, by leaping bodily through the upstage wall (leaving a cut-out silhouette of his body as the lights fade). With this ultimate action of resistance, Kent escapes, breaking through the parameters imposed both by American identity and the stage upon which the action is set. This final act of desperation, to escape into nothingness rather than assume the identity provided for him, allows Kent to achieve his earlier stated desire to disappear, to just “be gone” (257).

While this action may seem definitive for Kent, it creates much more ambiguity in terms of its message to the audience. Kent escapes, but to where? His escape into nothingness represents a venture into the realm of the unknown, suggesting that other models for identity may exist, but remain undiscovered. Another alternative is that Kent has escaped not into the unknown but into nowhere, suggesting that other models do *not* exist, and Americans delude themselves if they believe (and perhaps more significantly *behave*) otherwise. Either possibility seems more sacrificial than successful, and offers little help or hope for America’s citizens. If the only way to escape the potentially destructive nature of American identity is to disappear entirely, then where does that leave Americans? What remains for the audience is a paradox: the only way to escape American identity, which is depicted in *La Turista* as a dangerous monstrosity, is to retreat into nothingness. Shepard’s ambivalent ending defies closure (a consistent tendency in his plays), indicating that the dilemma of American identity remains unresolved. Perhaps the only certainty for Shepard is his early characters’ incessant impulse to escape.

“Looking for a Way Out”: *Suicide in B-Flat*

Almost a decade later, Shepard seemed to come no closer to resolving this distinctly American paradox. His characters still fail to discover an exit from that restrictive national consciousness. When *Suicide in B-Flat* premiered in 1976, it revealed a strikingly similar attitude toward the possibility of escaping American identity as the one in *La Turista*. *Suicide*, a sort of detective story about a man who is trying to disappear from view, presents an extremely clear picture of a man desperately trying to escape American character. Niles, the character around whom the entire action of the play revolves, has disappeared at the beginning of the play. Pablo and Louis, two incompetent detectives, have been called in to investigate the scene, hoping to find clues to indicate the true nature of the crime (if indeed a crime has been committed). Unable to make sense of the situation, they interrogate two musicians, Petrone and Laureen, who are waiting for Niles to return.

As the play progresses, though, it becomes clear that Niles has not been killed, kidnapped, or committed suicide. Rather, he has made a deliberate attempt to separate himself from any notion of American identity. As the hapless detectives fumble through their investigation, Niles and his accomplice Paullette, who serves as “a sort of spiritual guide from ‘the other side’” (Shewey 105), appear on the stage, but they are invisible to all the other characters. Their appearance brings more confusion to an already chaotic play, but the rationality of their arrival is less significant than their purpose. As Leslie Wade observes, “Although the metaphysics of this dynamic remain unexplained, Paullette and Niles have covenanted to remove the

encumbrances that inhibit Niles's creativity. Quite simply, Niles desires the utmost liberation" (*Shepard* 83).

Wade's comments focus on the role of the artist in society, and she correctly argues that "in the dilemma of [Niles] Shepard plays out many of his own conflicted stances regarding art, asceticism, and communal attachment" (*Shepard* 83). Doris Auerbach similarly contends that in *Suicide* Shepard "delves into the sources of his own creativity and the price the artist must inevitably pay for the act of creation" (46). Certainly, these critics provide an accurate reading of the play. An avant-garde musician, Niles had been experimenting with a new form of music before his disappearance. When Petrone attempts to describe the new music, Pablo and Louis, representatives of the status quo, become threatened by its destabilizing potential. Louis, in a panic-laced speech, expresses his fear, saying,

It feels like we're involved in something we'd be better off not knowing about. [...] All this free-form stuff is disturbing to my inner depths. It leaves me feeling nauseous. Like I'm going to throw everything up. Everything that's ever come into me. I'm a Republican by nature! That's what I am. I'm not ashamed of that! (*Suicide* 213)

Clearly, then, *Suicide* examines the artist's role in and effect on mainstream society. But the play also comments on the role of a national identity in the life of an American. Niles' forays into new forms of music allow him to remove himself from his established identity, as he searches for new methods of self-expression and new models of identity. When he appears on stage for the first time, Niles proclaims his uneasiness with returning to the scene, saying "I feel like I shouldn't have come back. I already escaped" (209). But Paullette claims that Niles' escape is incomplete until he is able symbolically to kill off the stereotypical personas that inhibit his ability to

construct a new identity. While critics such as Wade suggest that Niles and Paullette's intention is to "remove the encumbrances that inhibit Niles's creativity" (*Shepard* 83), such claims overlook the explicit American-ness of the characters that they attempt to destroy.

The personas Niles and Paullette attempt to eradicate exhibit characteristics that "appear to represent different stages of America's development as a nation" (Bottoms 144). Niles engages in several slow, elaborate costume changes on stage, pulling various personas from a suitcase. One persona Niles adopts is the corporate tycoon. Niles dons the guise of "a cigar-chomping capitalist type in full evening dress" (Bottoms 145), and describes a figure that holds significance, but is also flawed: "It was someone important. I can remember his face now. The kind of face that looks overfed. Too much rich food and not enough exercise" (*Suicide* 222). Reminiscent of Kent's tirade in *La Turista* against the "lily-livered weaklings" that America breeds, Niles' comments suggest that something has been lost from America's national image.

But the most significant character Niles must face is the cowboy, the persona that Niles is most reluctant to destroy, as he indicates to his accomplice: "I hate killing this one off first, Paullette. Can't we save this one till last?" (*Suicide* 214). Niles' reservations stem in part from his belief in the value of the cowboy image, and in its importance to America itself. As they prepare to annihilate the cowboy persona, Niles asserts its significance to American history and culture:

NILES: He's a hero Paullette! He discovered a whole way of life. He ate rattlesnakes for breakfast. Chicago wouldn't even exist if it wasn't for him. He drove cattle right to Chicago's front door. Towns sprang up wherever he

stopped to wet his whistle. Crime flourished all around him. The law was a joke to him. State lines. He sang songs to the Milky Way.

PAULLETTE: Turn him around, Niles.

NILES: You can't kill a hero! (217)

Niles' protestations reveal the legendary status to which the cowboy has been elevated in American culture. Niles attributes the very construction of America to the cowboy, reinscribing the image as a national myth. But Paullette realizes that in order to escape a limited vision of national identity, they must dispatch the ideologies represented in such images.

His description of the cowboy supports the notion of an American identity that no longer operates as it should. Trying to "Know this one first before he goes," Niles questions the image, asking "Is he King of the Cowboys or something? Does he make his women walk in ditches because he's so short? Does he wear elevator cowboy boots?" (217). Niles' queries seem to indicate that the mythical images of American identity do not correspond to the reality. In all Niles' descriptions of the personas, something does not fit; the King of Cowboys wears lifts. Shepard's Super Cowboy Man turns out to be Stephen Crane's Scratchy Wilson. And since these images are not accessible to Americans, the myths must be killed off so that a fresh start can be made.

But Shepard leaves much doubt as to whether these images can truly be eliminated from national consciousness. Niles (again like Kent) desperately seeks "a way out" (215), as Paullette explains, but he expresses disbelief in the ability to achieve it. As he confides to Paullette, "there's no guarantee I won't die along with him. [...] You don't know how attached I am. It feels like his skin is my skin" (215). The physical connection that Niles describes here is literalized in the faceless body

that he and Paullette discuss. The body is the result of a previous attempt at killing off personas, an attempt that renders the body unidentifiable (which hinders Louis and Pablo's efforts to solve the crime). Describing the results of his and Paullette's determination to kill off the identities that have overwhelmed him, Niles observes that "he had his whole face torn off. Beyond recognition" (230). Niles' concern demonstrates his fear that he will cease to exist once stripped of this identity. When Niles adopts the cowboy costume, he begins singing "Pecos Bill, Pecos Bill, Never died and he never will" (214). Not only does this song reinscribe the mythic quality of this particular persona, but it also suggests the difficulty of removing such myths: the legend of Pecos Bill will live on forever. And later, when faced with the destruction of his "King of the Cowboys," Niles protests, "He's a myth! [...] You can't kill a myth!" (219).¹⁴

Even more doubt is cast on the possibility of escaping from these images by the ineffectiveness of Paullette's attacks on Niles' personas. When Paullette finally attempts to eradicate the cowboy persona, her arrow hits Niles square in the back, but it has no effect on Niles himself. Instead, a second arrow simultaneously strikes Louis, who staggers around the stage, "*moaning and trying to pull it out*" (218). Similarly, when Paullette shoots Niles the capitalist with the pistol, it is Pablo and not Niles who feels the impact.

Upon first impression, it may seem that Niles' survival, combined with the injuries to Louis and Pablo, suggest some level of success for Niles in escaping from

¹⁴ Niles' comments re-emphasize Shepard's obsession with myth. While Shepard is insistent upon the vital nature of an "essence of myth" in creating and sustaining a national ideology, he is far less clear about how to recover this essence that he argues has clearly been lost in American society. This subject will receive a fuller discussion in chapter four.

American identity. Throughout the play, Pablo and Louis are clearly established as defenders of the status quo. Pablo, when faced with the potential for change represented by Niles' innovative musical efforts, unleashes a diatribe that reveals his conservative alliances:

How does it relate to breaking with tradition! To breaking off with the past!
To throwing the diligent efforts of our forefathers and their forefathers before
them to the winds! To turning the classics to garbage before our very eyes!
To distorting the very foundations of our cherished values! [...] To changing
the shape of American morality! (205)

Pablo's sentiments echo Louis' speech about the destabilizing effect of Niles' radical ideology (one which offers the possibility of escaping prescribed identity), and both men begin to panic as the investigation continues, revealing the danger of having your stable sense of identity dislocated. Since it is the conservative world of the status quo that is being threatened, and since Louis and Pablo are the characters who feel the physical pain of the persona murders (while Niles appears unfazed), it seems as if Niles and Paullette are successful in their attempts to eradicate their disenchanting vision of American identity.

But ultimately, neither Pablo nor Louis suffers any permanent damage from his mishaps—the status quo remains unchanged. Furthermore, the final scene of the play, where the two investigators handcuff Niles “*so that all three are locked to each other*” (229), creates a strong sense of ambivalence about the possibility of escaping American identity. The image of the manacled group serves as visual evidence—yet another one of Shepard's indelible theatrical moments—and a final reminder that the individual cannot be divided from national character. Niles verbalizes this

inseparability in a ranting speech delivered just before he is handcuffed to Pablo and Louis:

Are you inside me or outside me? Am I inside you? Am I inside you right now? Am I buzzing away at your membranes? Your brain waves? Driving you berserk? Creating explosions? Destroying your ancient patterns? Or am I just like you? Just exactly like you? So exactly like you that we're exactly the same. So exactly that we're not even apart. Not even separate. Not even two things but just one. Only one. Indivisible. (229)

In handcuffs moments later, Niles, representing both the individual American and the artist, becomes literally inseparable from Pablo and Louis. Ending his speech with the single word "indivisible," perhaps evocative of the nation's pledge of allegiance, emphasizes the inextricable connection between the American and American identity: Niles simply cannot define himself outside of the parameters of his flawed vision of national identity. In Shepard's plays, there is no man without the country.

Much like the ambiguity surrounding Kent's escape, Niles' efforts to break away from American identity seem doomed to failure. Why, then, do so many of Shepard's characters engage in such fruitless flight? To a large extent, the answer lies in the disillusionment so many of them feel about America and the promises it is supposed to hold for its citizens. Kent rails against an America that has become "an isolated land of purification" (*Turista* 265). Niles realizes that his own identity has become consumed by the much larger force of a dominant American identity, as he reveals when he tells Paullette that "they've taken me over and there's no room left for me. They've stolen their way into my house when I wasn't looking" (*Suicide* 216). Niles' comments also reveal the insidious nature of national identity. The personas he attempts to eradicate are forced upon him, and his words suggest an identity invasion,

in which Niles is unable to identify himself outside of his perception of the American image.

While Shepard's characters can momentarily achieve a moment of nothingness, of disappearance, they can never really shed their national consciousness entirely. Shepard complicates his characters' efforts by periodically idealizing the principles inherent in national identity, reinscribing their value at the same time he castigates their limitations.

Shepard thus creates a world in which his characters truly believe in the possibility of an achievable better life (one based on land ownership and self-sufficiency), yet they will always be denied in their quest. This paradox triggers the escapist impulse, which, according to Shepard, must be seen as a distinctly American characteristic, and causes the disillusionment that Americans experience in their attempts to create a sense of self-identity.

“I Need Landmarks”: *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* and the Reinscription of American Identity

That same disillusionment with American identity can often motivate Shepard's characters to try even harder to embrace it. They feel that an American identity is still attainable if they can remove themselves from their current conditions of dislocation from self, land, and society. For these characters, including Cody from *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974) and Weston after his rebirth in *Curse*, it is not an impossible dream but a realizable goal.

Cody exemplifies the belief that under the right circumstances, American identity is not only attainable but also the supreme aspiration. Whereas the endings of plays

such as *Suicide in B-Flat* and *La Turista* suggest that escape from American identity is impossible, *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* reinscribes the inherent values of that national identity by idealizing the cowboy as the hero of the play.

Cody, who has been kidnapped by gamblers who wish to exploit his gift for picking winning racehorses, continually deteriorates physically and mentally as the play progresses. He attributes this to being cut off from the source of his power, his land in Wyoming, “which he came from and from which his values and inspiration derive” (Tucker 95). He pleads with Beaujo, one of his captors, to let him go: “I wanna go back to Wyoming and raise sheep. That’s all I wanna do. I got no more tips. I’m from the Great Plains not the city. He’s poisoned my dreams with these cities” (*Geography* 287). Along with an implicit rejection of urban development, these lines reveal Cody’s association of the West with an American utopia. This mythic vision of the West is enhanced by Fingers, the supposed ringleader of the kidnapping scheme, when he experiences a change of heart and agrees to free Cody. Fingers, reminiscing about the trip to Wyoming to kidnap Cody, offers an Edenic portrait of the area, exclaiming,

I remember that! I remember thinking this is the West! This is really The West! Then we got to that town where Buffalo Bill lived. I forgot the name of it. Oh what a town! Saloons with Winchester rifles tacked up on the walls. Real cowboys in leather chaps. Indians shuffling through the dusty streets. Buffalo Bill’s name plastered on everything. And at night. At night it was magical. Like praying. I’d never heard such a silence as that. Nowhere on the earth. So vast and lonely. Just the brisk cold night blowing in through the hotel window. And outside, the blue peaks of the Big Horn mountains. The moon shining on their snowy caps. The prairie stretching out and out like a great ocean. I felt that God was with me then. The earth held me in its arms. (301)

Fingers' comments reveal the reverence with which he treats his vision of the West; he describes his trip to Wyoming (or his memory of it, at least) as a religious experience. His description of an idealized landscape reinforces the American's connection to the land. But his references to Buffalo Bill as the epitome of the cowboy image seem ironic given Bill's position as a showman and marketer of a commodified version of the West.

Fingers, however, never recognizes the incongruity of his description. Like Cody, Fingers comes to believe in the power of the image he describes, discerning some vital force in it that allows people to establish ties to the land, the nation, and its history. The earnest conviction in Cody's and Fingers' individual descriptions of the West suggests their explicit self-identification with the land and the cowboy way of life. (Henry Hackamore, the deranged millionaire recluse in Shepard's *Seduced*, written two years after *Geography*, will exhibit the same false hope.)

Shepard further emphasizes the saving power of the West with the ending of *Geography*. In the final moments, Cody is literally rescued by the West, in the form of his two brothers, Jason and Jasper. Shepard's stage directions for the brothers are quite specific: "*They're both about six foot five and weigh 250 lbs. each. They wear Wyoming cowboy gear with dust covering them from head to foot. Their costumes should be well used and authentic, without looking like dime-store cowboys. They both carry double-barreled shotguns and wear side guns on their waists*" (*Geography* 306). Shepard's demand for authenticity suggests that at some level a "true West" does exist, and is a realizable goal.¹⁵ Shepard's directions also accentuate the

¹⁵ Given the meticulous nature with which Shepard describes the costumes in his plays and stories, the authenticity of Jason's and Jasper's outfits seems significant. It strikes a sharp contrast from the

physical, hardy, pioneering, and also violent nature of American identity. Jason and Jasper—American Cowboys—announce their presence with a blast, as their guns “blaze across the room, killing the Doctor, Santee, and Beaujo. They take their bleeding brother Cody with them, back home to the Great Plains of Wyoming, where he will regain his spirit, his wholeness” (Tucker 98). The West, it seems, is both paradise and salvation.

Geography is not Shepard’s only play that espouses the lifesaving power of the West. In *The Unseen Hand* (1969), Cisco, Sycamore and Blue, three cowboy brothers, are called upon by a race of aliens to save their planet (which they successfully do). Willie, the alien who recruits the cowboys, chooses them because they exemplify “Power in the man! Tower of power! Texaco sucks! Texas man! Longhorn panhandle tough, cowboy leather man! Send him home! Where the buffalo roam!” (18). Shepard’s depiction of the West helps create the paradox his characters constantly face. While criticizing the inaccessibility of American identity, he also reinscribes its importance by idealizing it as a redemptive force.

Shepard himself feels a strong attachment to the West, and specifically to the image of the cowboy that, for him, embodies American identity. He has admitted that “Cowboys are really interesting to me” (Chubb et al. 190). Robert Coe, describing Shepard’s professed interest in rodeo, explains that Shepard “has a deep admiration for real cowboys—he thinks it’s a more authentic way of life” (qtd. in Oumano 137). His respect for cowboys and the principles they represent—ruggedness, pioneering

inauthentic costume Shepard describes for the Super Cowboy Man. Such contrasting images highlight the conflicted way in which Shepard depicts the cowboy.

spirit, strong connections to the land—reveals itself in much of Shepard’s work, and partly explains the mythic treatment of the West in *Geography* and many other plays.

But even as Shepard glorifies the saving power of the West, he complicates that image by infusing the cowboys’ language with trite expressions and stale, Hollywood-like dialogue. Contrasting sharply with Shepard’s admonition that the brothers’ costumes be authentic, the playwright supplies them with lines that could come straight from a B-grade Western. As the brothers blast their way into the hotel room, they spout clichéd rhetoric and hackneyed phrases, announcing, “We come fer our brother, mister. You so much as make a twitch and you can kiss tomorrow goodbye” (*Geography* 306), complete with spurs jingling as they walk into the room. So while Shepard takes pains to provide the brothers with an authentic outfit, his use of dialogue undercuts that realism by giving the brothers the appearance of dime-store cowboys.

Furthermore, Cody’s name directly associates him with Buffalo Bill Cody, a connection which again challenge’s Cody’s authenticity as a “real” cowboy. Combined with the deus ex machina technique employed as the brothers appear from nowhere to save the day, the resolution of *Geography* provides a peculiarly artificial, contrived feel.

So even when Shepard depicts the West as the path to redemption and a rediscovered connection to national and to individual identity, he problematizes the portrait by suggesting the manufactured nature of its image. The contradiction inherent in such conflicted imagery stems from Shepard’s own doubt as to the possibility of retrieving the essence of myth that he feels is critical to recovering

American identity. Gone but impossible to forget, the image of the American pioneer retains its mesmerizing hold on its citizens.

“You Recognize Poison, Right?”: *Curse of the Starving Class* and American Failure

Because their vision of American identity is flawed and inaccessible in modern culture, Americans will fail at every attempt to achieve that national character. But since they cannot abandon the quest for identity, both individual and national, they become caught in a vicious cycle of desperate search and failure. Weston, the father in *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978), represents the American failure. *Curse* is the first of Shepard’s “family trilogy,” which continues with *Buried Child* (1978) and culminates in *True West* (1981). *Curse* is perhaps Shepard’s most direct examination of the collapse of the American Dream, and Weston embodies the breakdown of “the American” at every level. His family can be seen as a microcosm of the self-destructive quest for American identity: the father, the authority figure, attempts to impose his identity on his children by explaining the poison that runs through the blood of his forefathers; one child attempts to escape and is destroyed; the other child attempts to embrace and repeats the sins of the father. The cycle continues.

The alleged patriarch of the family, Weston exemplifies the desired flight from America’s land and reveals an implicit disillusionment with its national character. He fails to fulfill any conditions of American identity, a failure that begins with the basic social unit of the family. His dissatisfaction with his family life is evident: notably, the play opens with his absence. After an all-night drinking binge, Weston returns early in the morning to discover he has been locked out, and promptly destroys the

front door in a rage before getting back into the car and tearing off into the darkness. So before he even appears on stage, Weston's violent temper and inability to play the role of protector to his family are revealed. As the play continues, Weston articulates his failure at fulfilling the function of a patriarch by offering threats instead of security. When he finds out that his wife Ella is not home, he demands to know where she is, screaming "Don't try protecting her! There's no protection! Understand! None!" (165). Instead of providing the protection that the family is supposed to offer its members, Weston terrorizes his family, becoming more of a threat than a guardian. His menacing attitude forces his family to seek protection outside the nuclear unit, as Ella turns to a sleazy real estate developer for security: "[Weston] can't hurt me now! I've got protection! If he lays a hand on me, I'll have him cut to ribbons!" (173). And, at times, his children feel the same fear of their father, as both Emma and Wesley reflexively react to Weston's presence by wanting to flee the stage.

Beyond his inability to provide the physical comfort and protection of a family unit, Weston also fails to supply sustenance for his family. The refrigerator, a focal point of the play due to the characters' constant inspection of its contents, remains mostly empty for the majority of the play. Upon one of Weston's random returns to the house, he stocks it full with artichokes, which Ella promptly throws out, astutely pointing out, "It's a joke bringing artichokes back here when we're out of food" (171). And even when Weston experiences his rebirth and attempts to create a better family atmosphere, significantly by making a ham-and-eggs breakfast for his son, Weston himself ends up eating all the food he prepares. Weston, then, becomes more

parasite than patriarch, and when the family needs him the most, he abandons them, presumably to “start a whole new life” down in Mexico (194).

But Weston’s desire to escape relates more to his legal troubles than to his chaotic family situation. He borrowed money from a shady source in order to purchase some land sold by a con artist (another shady source) that turned out to be worthless desert. As the moneylenders seek to reclaim the loan, Weston seeks to relocate to Mexico. Naively, he thinks he can sell his house (which he has drunkenly signed over to Ellis, the owner of the Alibi Club, a bar where Weston frequently goes to escape temporarily) and get out:

WESTON: I was thinkin’ I could sell it and buy some land down in Mexico.

WESLEY: Why down there?

WESTON: I like it down there. (159)

Weston’s true reasons for wanting to go to Mexico are far more concrete than the vague response he offers Wesley here. With the threat of physical harm looming, Weston is looking for the same type of anonymity that Kent sought in *La Turista*:

WESLEY: They’ll be coming for you here. They know where you live now.

WESTON: Where should I go?

WESLEY: How ‘bout Mexico?

WESTON: Mexico? Yeah. That’s where everyone escapes to, right? It’s full of escape artists down there. I could go down there and get lost. I could disappear. I could start a whole new life down there.

WESLEY: Maybe. (194)

As with Kent, Mexico sounds ideal to Weston because of what it is not: it is not America.¹⁶ In Mexico, Weston thinks he can shed his identity and begin again,

¹⁶ Shepard consistently represents Mexico as the place for escape. Most of his characters who seek to abandon America’s principles and disappear entirely. Along with Weston and Emma, Vinnie suggests to Rosie that they run off to Mexico to hide from Rosie’s husband (*Simpatico*); Kent flees to Mexico “to just disappear for a while” (*Turista* 257); and Blood, who is threatening Honey and Young Man

creating a life down there that he could not sustain in America. Wesley appears more skeptical about the possibility of escape (even though he too has expressed a half-hearted desire to head off to Alaska) but Weston convinces himself that a “whole new life” awaits him down in Mexico.

Weston’s motivation to escape certainly seems most directly related to his loan shark predicament; due to his financial missteps, Weston’s physical safety depends on relocation. But Weston’s escapist impulse has ideological underpinnings as well. He has failed to achieve any semblance of American identity; through the course of *Curse*, Weston systematically breaks down at every facet of his character: he fails as a landowner, a businessman, and a family man. And all of Weston’s failures stem from his inability to profit from the land he owns.

Weston owns land in America; his family occupies an avocado ranch in the West (where so many of Shepard’s plays are set). But he cannot make the land produce for him, either literally or financially. In a drunken stupor, Weston agrees to sell his family’s home to Ellis in order to get enough cash to cover his loan. The irony of Weston’s decision runs deep—he borrows money to obtain worthless land, an action that ultimately costs him ownership of the family ranch, which is valuable and potentially productive. In describing his business transaction with his son Wesley, Weston tells him that the land he bought is

a real piece of shit. Just a bunch of strings on sticks with the lizards blowing across it.

WESLEY: Nothing around it?

WESTON: Not a thing. Just desert. No way to even get water to the goddamn place. No way to even set a trailer on it. (158-59)

into assisting him, warns “if you goof once more I suggest that you and your foxy lady here head South of the border [...] ‘cause we’re gonna’ be after your ass” (*Operation Sidewinder* 232). Mexico becomes the location where people can erase their identity.

In contrast to the valueless land Weston purchased in the middle of the desert, the family ranch contains a potential that others are able to see, even if Weston himself cannot. Ellis, while inspecting his newly acquired property, speculates that the ranch would make a good steak house, and remarks that the “place is full of potential” (177). Taylor, a shady real estate agent who is attempting to buy the house, echoes Ellis’ remarks, observing that “the land is full of potential” (153). And when Weston asks Wesley what he thinks of the ranch, Wesley pointedly replies “I wouldn’t sell it. [...] It’s just here. And we’re on it. And we wouldn’t be if it got sold” (166). While Wesley’s response is practical, it also reveals an implicit understanding of the importance of land ownership as a means of sustenance, and perhaps self-fulfillment. Weston, however, recognizes none of this until it is too late. In contrast to the potential the land holds, the reality, as Ella reminds Weston, consists of “beat-up cars, the rusted out tractor, the moldy avocados, the insane horse, the demented sheep, the chickens” (172). Weston has ruined the ranch, and ultimately abandons his land and his family. He loses all of his land and never receives compensation for any of it.

Weston’s inability to utilize the land to produce for him, financially or agriculturally, also reveals his failure as a businessman and as a family man. From a business standpoint, Weston is completely inept. He borrows money from a less-than-reputable source to acquire a useless, arid plot of desert land from a con artist. His recounting of the purchase exposes Weston’s business incompetence: “Some guy came to the door selling land. So I bought some. [...] [He] looked respectable. Talked a real good line. Said it was an investment for the future. All kinds of great things were going to be developed. Golf courses, shopping centers, banks, sauna

baths. All that kinda' stuff. So I bought it" (158). Of course, none of this would ever come to fruition; Weston was simply (and easily) duped by Taylor, who is so transparent that both Tate children, Wesley and Emma, can see through his act. Even Ella, the clueless wife, is aware of Weston's lack of business acumen, as she discloses to Wesley when she tells him "I just happen to know he was screwed out of five hundred bucks. [...] [A]nother shrewd business deal" (172). (Ella herself proves to be as inept as Weston, as Taylor cons her almost as easily as he conned Weston.) Weston's laughable decision to buy land from a man who should be selling encyclopedias, not land, door-to-door demonstrates his incompetence.

Weston's financial negotiations also reveal his failure as a family man. His willingness to sell the farm, leaving his family with no place to live, no shelter whatsoever, illustrates his inability to maintain a family. His selfish and uncaring behavior, evident throughout the play, is angrily revealed during a drunken rant:

It's like living in a den of vipers! Spies! Conspiracies behind my back! I'M BEING TAKEN FOR A RIDE BY EVERY ONE OF YOU! I'm the one who works! I'm the one who brings home food! THIS IS MY HOUSE! AND I'M SELLING THIS HOUSE! AND I'M TAKING ALL THE MONEY BECAUSE IT'S OWED ME! YOU ALL OWE IT TO ME! EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU! (169)

Weston's intoxicated outburst exposes his inability to function as the center of the family unit. His selfish proclamation confirms what his actions have already suggested—his complete failure as a father and husband. These actions begin the moment the curtain rises on the play: as the lights come up, Wesley is cleaning up the broken remains of the front door to the house, which Weston had destroyed the night before. Both literally and symbolically, Weston's destruction of the door represents the lack of protection that he provides for his family.

While Weston spends much of the play exemplifying his escape from his family and troubles on a literal level (and American identity on an ideological level), his rebirth late in the play illustrates the seemingly inevitable reinscription of the principles of American character. In a moment of epiphany, significantly one that comes to him while he walks around the ranch, Weston realizes that everything he has been searching for is right there on the farm where he and his family live. In a long, mostly-monologue scene, Weston reveals much about how his pursuit of a sense of self-identity is strongly connected to something larger than the individual:

I started wondering who this was walking around in the orchard at six-thirty in the morning. It didn't feel like me. It was some character in a dark overcoat. [...] It didn't feel like the owner of a piece a' property as nice as this. Then I started to wonder who the owner was. I mean if I didn't feel like the owner, then who was the owner? [...] Then it struck me that I actually was the owner. That somehow it was me and I was actually the one walking on my own piece of land. And that gave me a great feeling. (185)

The connection between the land and the man is explicit here. Weston spends much of the play dislocated from everything and everyone around him. He alienates himself from his family and the rest of society, and loses all sense of who he is. But as he examines his land, he is reborn. Once he recognizes his status as a landowner, he regains the ability to understand his own character and recreate his identity.¹⁷

After his spiritual communion with his land, Weston shows his eagerness to reinvest in the American Dream. He seeks a link to his family, his land and to America. Weston exhibits a newfound interest in his family after his walk around the ranch and the house, an experience that convinces him of the interconnected nature of family members as the hub of the wheel of society:

And I felt like I knew every single one of you. Every one. Like I knew you through the flesh and blood. Like our bodies were connected and we could never escape that. But I didn't feel like escaping. I felt like it was a good thing. It was good to be connected like that. That a family wasn't just a social thing. It was an animal thing. It was a reason of nature that we were all together under the same roof. Not that we had to be but that we were supposed to be. And I started feeling glad about it. I started feeling full of hope. (186)

The connection Weston describes, primal in its nature, strongly resembles dialogue found in many other Shepard works that articulate a unifying bond of blood that stretches through generations of families. In *Buried Child*, Vince delivers a well-known monologue tracing his lineage in his own face, where "his face became his father's face [...] and his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. [...] I followed my family clear into Iowa. Every last one. Straight into the Corn Belt and further" (*Buried* 130). As with Weston, Vince suggests that much of the basis for a man's identity develops before he is even born: the identity of a man is formed by the men who preceded him.

Weston also comes to believe that the ranch can be the key to reconnecting to a larger sense of national community, one that would identify him as the distinctly American farmer, a man who produces both sustenance and financial success from the land he tills. After his rebirth, Weston begins to speculate with Wesley about the potential of the ranch:

So I was thinkin' about that avocado deal you were talkin' about before! You know, joining up with the "Grower's Association" and everything! And I was thinkin' it might not be such a bad deal after all! [...] We could pick 'em ourselves and sell 'em direct to the company! [...] Wouldn't take much to get the whole operation goin' full-tilt again! I'll resell that piece a' land out there! That'll give us somethin' to get us started! (186-187)

¹⁷ Weston's comments echo those of Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur's character James, as he inspects his land. James espouses the "true and the only philosophy of an American farmer," which again emphasizes the American's ties to his land (Crèvecoeur 54).

With the prospect of a land full of potential, Weston feels the optimism of a man who has found himself. His revitalized relationship with the land allows him to create a tie to a larger community. Weston's ironic plight illustrates a paradox of American identity that consumes so many Shepard characters. He appears genuine in his desire to reform. But since he cannot dissociate his individual identity from a flawed and incomplete image of American character, his chances for success seem slim.

Weston, like so many Shepard characters, is doomed to fail in his bid for a coherent, stable identity. While his intentions finally seem good at the end of the play, his impulse to escape overrides his desire to take another shot at embodying his newfound vision of American character. He deserts his family without so much as a goodbye, leaving them to fend off the creditors and criminals (for Shepard, these are sometimes the same people) that Weston himself set on them through his incompetent business dealings.

The rest of the family, meanwhile, continues its descent into self-destructive ruin. While Ella remains relatively unscathed, the Tate children explicitly represent the paradoxical situation that living in America engenders, and the escapist impulse that it fosters. One child endeavors to escape *from* American identity while the other hopes to embrace it. Emma attempts to escape America altogether by abandoning its borders as well as its principles. She wants to deny her heritage by renouncing her family's name and creating a new identity for herself down in Mexico. Lamenting about her inability to "get out of here" (147), Emma develops an elaborate and imaginative scenario for her new life:

I was going to work my way along the coast, stopping at all the little towns, speaking Spanish. I was going to learn to be a mechanic and work on four-wheel-drive vehicles that broke down. [...] Then I'd learn how to be a short-order cook and write novels on the side. [...] Then I'd get published and disappear into the heart of Mexico. Just like that guy.

ELLA: What guy?

EMMA: That guy who wrote *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. [...] He had initials for a name. And he disappeared. Nobody knew where to send his royalties. He escaped. (149)

Emma's comments mirror the desire for total disappearance evident in many of Shepard's characters, including Kent from *La Turista*, Henry Hackamore from *Seduced*, and Niles from *Suicide in B-Flat*. Her escape attempts are quite literal. First she tries to ride away on a horse (an ironic choice of transportation), and then in the family car. The horse ends up dragging her around through the mud. The car is even worse. Moments after Emma exits the stage, the car explodes, presumably with her in it. All her attempts to disappear fail entirely, and ultimately become destructive.

Wesley reacts in a totally opposite manner from Emma. Instead of attempting to escape American character, he firmly believes in its primary values: land ownership and self-sufficiency. His self-sufficiency is evident from the outset of the play. As the curtain rises, Wesley is clearing away the debris from the front door that Weston drunkenly destroyed the night before. The second act opens with Wesley building a new door. Clearly, Wesley is the protector of the household. His belief in self-reliance leads him to be the only family member who is able to recognize that the land they own can be the means to financial success, as well as a pathway that will reconnect them to national identity:

WESLEY: We don't have to sell, you know. We could fix the place up.

WESTON: It's too late for that. I owe money.
 WESLEY: I could get a job.
 WESTON: You're gonna' have to.
 WESLEY: I will. We could work this place by ourselves.
 WESTON: Don't be stupid. There's not enough trees to make a living.
 WESLEY: We could join the California Avocado Association. We could make a living that way. (170)

Wesley recognizes the inherent value of the land upon which they live. Not only can it provide them with sustenance and money, but it can also reconnect the family as a unit, as well as to a larger community of American farmers.

Wesley's desire to embrace the principles of American identity compels him to attempt to protect it from destruction. He recognizes that the loss of the land, which both Weston and Ella individually plan to sell, symbolizes the loss of a way of life in America, the "True West" that Shepard idealizes in many of his plays:

WESLEY: You don't understand what's happening yet, do you?
 EMMA: With what?
 WESLEY: The house. You think it's Mr. and Mrs. America who're gonna' buy this place, but it's not. It's Taylor. [...] He works for an agency. Land development.
 EMMA: So what?
 WESLEY: So it means more than losing a house. It means losing a country. (163)

Wesley explicitly links the ownership of land with American character. And he clearly feels that the encroachment of development and urban growth threatens that idyllic American existence.

In response to the rapidly expanding urbanization he fears, Wesley expresses a Huck Finn-like desire to escape; but he does not wish to abandon America. Unlike the rest of the Tate family, Wesley seeks the last remaining American territory for the pioneering spirit, Alaska: "the frontier. [...] It's full of possibilities. It's

undiscovered” (163). If the ranch is to be sold, Wesley will light out for the territories and reclaim the American spirit.

Shepard will soon dispel any mythic vision of Alaska with *True West* (1981), Shepard’s final play in his “family trilogy.” In it, Austin and Lee, two feuding brothers, are staying at their mother’s house while she is on vacation in Alaska. Mom’s presence as a tourist contradicts Wesley’s contention that Alaska is “undiscovered.” And when asked what she saw while there, Mom replies “just glaciers” (*True* 53), a comment that echoes Emma’s response when Wesley announces his intention to head to Alaska: “Who wants to discover a bunch of ice?” (*Curse* 163). Mom reveals her disenchantment with Alaska, saying, “It was the worst feeling being up there. In Alaska. Staring out a window. I never felt so desperate before” (*True* 59). Clearly, escaping to Alaska will not revitalize the pioneering spirit that Wesley hopes to embrace.

While Wesley’s acceptance of American identity initially seems more effective than Emma’s retreat from it, Wesley fares no better with his decisions. As he attempts to embrace American identity, he will make the same mistakes as his father and bring about his own ruin. Wesley’s end seems inevitable, as he dons the clothes his father wore before his rebirth. With each article of Weston’s clothing Wesley wears, “it seemed like a part of him was growing on me. I could feel him taking over me” (*Curse* 196).¹⁸ At one point, Ella even mistakes Wesley for his father, calling him Weston.

¹⁸ Wesley’s comments specifically refer to his father, but the language resoundingly echoes Niles’ lament about the intrusion of the various personas of American identity that “have taken me over and there’s no room left for me” (*Suicide* 216).

Ella's misidentification of Wesley as Weston suggests that the son is doomed to continue the cycle of failure that began generations earlier. Emma identifies heredity as the problem: "It's chemical. [...] Something in the blood. Hereditary. Highly explosive. [...] In the blood. Nitroglycerine" (152). Weston labels it "poison," but comes to the same conclusion. Intimating that Wesley will ultimately succumb to the same fate as him, Weston tell Wesley, "I never saw my old man's poison until I was much older than you. [...] I saw myself infected with it. [...] I saw me carrying it around. His poison in my body" (167). In the same conversation, Wesley reveals his own awareness of the inevitability of his fate:

WESLEY: I know it's there, but I don't know what it is.

WESTON: You'll find out. (168)

When Wesley later appears wearing his father's old outfit, his fate becomes evident. Weston demands to know why Wesley is wearing "clothes that've been thrown-up in, pissed in, and God knows what all in"; Wesley pointedly replies, "they fit me" (191).

Ultimately, then, Wesley is just as doomed as Emma. Embracing American identity results in the same fatal consequences as escaping it. Either way, the escapist impulse can never end satisfactorily, and so, for Shepard's early characters, it never ends at all. Shepard's characters will continue to attempt one form of escape or the other, yet both efforts will remain futile and self-destructive.

"Taken by the Dream": *Seduced* and the American Escape Artist

In *Seduced* (1976), Shepard creates a character who embodies both sides of the escapist impulse. Henry Hackamore, a character based in part on wealthy and

somewhat deranged recluse Howard Hughes, exhibits both the impulse to escape America and later the desire to embrace its principles.

As the play unfolds, Hackamore appears to have achieved Kent's desperate desire to escape. Since Shepard specifies a set that is "*basically bare and empty but for two lone palm trees*" and an "*old black Naugahyde reclining chair*" (*Seduced* 233), it is almost as empty as the nothingness Kent longs for in *La Turista*. As the lights come up in the first act, Randy Newman's "Sail Away" plays appropriately in the background, reemphasizing the escapist theme that dominates much of the play. (Perhaps an even more applicable song would have been the Beatles' "Nowhere Man," as Hackamore sits on stage in his nowhere land making all his nowhere plans.)

What is significant about this opening scene is its absolute lack of location. While on a literal level, Hackamore must be somewhere (the assumption is that he has removed himself to an island close to the American border), Shepard is careful never to reveal any clues as to any specific place. The characters deliberately avoid naming their locale, and the only contact Hackamore has with his outside environment is through an enormous window, which is covered by a huge black curtain. Henry insists on keeping the curtain drawn, revealing his paranoid fear of intrusion from the outside world, and successfully cutting Hackamore off from the outside, any outside. When Hackamore's servant Raul suggests raising the curtain for a moment, Hackamore vehemently protests, saying, "No! Nothing from out there comes in here! Nothing! No life! Not sun, not moon, not sound, not nothing! [...]" That's the law! That's the absolute law!" (237). Henry has found what is on the other side of the wall that Kent leapt through ten years earlier. Henry is nowhere.

Although Henry has been able to achieve a physical escape to nothingness, he retains the “lily-livered weakling” character that Kent suggests modern America breeds. Henry’s maniacal rants about “the price we have to pay [...] to insure our immunity” (*Seduced* 254) recall Kent’s lamentations over an America so purified that “a man doesn’t even have a chance to build up his own immunity” (*Turista* 265).

Through Henry Hackamore, Shepard seems to suggest the fallen, even diseased state of American identity. Henry’s overt resemblance to Howard Hughes depicts a national character that once exemplified the values of America, but now has been reduced to a pathetic self-created outcast of civilization, an image that only holds significance in the world of the imagination. The choice of Howard Hughes as Shepard’s model for the American seems pointed: a tycoon who flourished financially in an array of businesses—the film industry, aviation, hotel and casino management; a pioneering spirit that advanced aeronautics with his innovative inventions (some of which led to the first transcontinental flights) and with his record-breaking achievements as a pilot (such as breaking the world speed record in a plane); a man who, while certainly never poor, can be accurately called a self-made man, as he created a persona that was perhaps larger than any individual can hope to achieve. Hughes embodied American character.

But Hughes also embodied the dark side of American character. His at times ruthless ambition, his increasing distrust and paranoia, and his obsessive fear of germs, all of which Shepard uses in his portrait of Henry, reveal a depiction of an American identity that can have potentially destructive physical and psychological consequences. Shepard blatantly parodies Hughes’ eccentricities, making the

connection between Hackamore and Hughes, the American icon, explicit. In the opening scene, Shepard lampoons Hughes' paranoid desire "that any item handed to Hughes be covered by a Kleenex" (*Hughes* par. 2) through Henry, who meticulously "extracts single sheets of Kleenex from a large box on a nightstand beside his chair and slowly spreads the sheets on different parts of his body" (*Seduced* 233). From the outset, Henry exposes himself as a corrupted image of the American.

What makes Hackamore's situation all the more ironic is that he has seemingly achieved the American Dream, yet he still yearns to escape. Henry boasts of his fleet of planes, and of the "hospital I built with excess cash" (240), but his success and renown have compelled him to run away from his country and himself rather than allowing him to become a self-actualization of American identity. And so he flees. As the play opens he is already nowhere. But even that does not satisfy Henry's escapist impulse. Henry, who according to doctors, Raul, and himself is dying, suddenly decides to return to America, a move that will somehow be his ultimate escape. Explaining to Raul that a "man's got a right to die in his homeland" (270), Henry is ready to return from nowhere and adopt the persona of the American once more.

Henry's determination to return to America again exemplifies the contradictory impulses that roil beneath the seemingly placid surface of American identity. Initially disillusioned with America and its principles (which he feels he has fulfilled in his life), he seeks to escape an ideology that failed to keep its promise. But, like all Shepard characters, for Henry escape is impossible; no American can ever be defined outside the nation, as Shepard discovered during his own escape from America's

borders.¹⁹ His disappearance into nothingness lasts only briefly, and it fails to offer Henry the solace he desires. So he succumbs to the only alternative available to him: he attempts to escape *to* America, fully recommitting to its ideologies. Vowing that “this time I’ll escape for good” (*Seduced* 255), Henry orders Raul to prepare his aviator’s outfit as he intends to fly

straight to Nevada. I’m going to land in Nevada in the middle of the day. I’m going to land with my women. All of us. We’re going to disembark in the blazing sun. We’re going to appear out of nowhere. We’re going to climb into sixteen black Chevrolets and drive straight out across the Mojave Desert. (254)

Henry’s proclamation indicates his renewed belief in American identity. He intends to provide at least the appearance of American success: reappearing in a blaze of glory, expressing the magnitude of his greatness through a spectacle of wealth and power.

Perhaps more fully than any other Shepard character, Henry reveals the overt artifice of American identity. As he prepares to make his final escape, this one a return from the abyss and back to America, he realizes that he must project the appropriate American image, this time of the pioneering aviator. He tells Raul, “I want you to find me the proper equipment. The jacket I used to wear. The helmet. The scarf. I’ll need all those things” (254). Significantly, Henry asks Raul to prepare his outfit, not his plane or any other travel arrangement, which emphasizes the importance of appearance in identity. Henry, like Kent and Niles, feels that a change in costume can correspond to a change in character. But the very fact that Henry requires the assistance of Raul to help him adopt this persona suggests that Henry will never be able truly to embody the identity for which he yearns.

¹⁹ Shepard, in a self-imposed exile, took his family to London from 1971 to 1974.

It is precisely this division between the illusion of American identity and the reality of life in America that creates the dislocation and escapist impulse in American citizens. In a revealing moment, Henry, who is being forced by Raul to sign over control of his fortune, identifies the moment he lost sense of what it meant to be an American:

HENRY: I see it now. [...] I see how I disappeared. It happened a long time ago. A long, long, time ago.

RAUL: Where was it, Henry?

HENRY: Texas. That's the last time I lived on this earth. Texas. I disappeared in a dream. I dreamed myself into another shape. Another body. I made myself up.

RAUL: Keep signing, Henry.

HENRY: It happened in a second. In a flash. I was taken by the dream and all the time I thought I was taking it. It was a sudden seduction. Abrupt. Almost like rape. You could call it rape. I gave myself up. Sold it all down the river. (274)

Henry's moment of recognition sounds reminiscent of other Shepard characters, notably Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class* and Niles in *Suicide in B-Flat*, who suggest that a greater force, an imposed national character, displaced their own individual sense of identity. While Henry indicates his own complicity in his loss of identity ("I made myself up"), he also squarely implicates America as being responsible for his plight ("I was taken by the dream and all the time I thought I was taking it"). His description of the American dream, first as a seduction and then as a rape, exposes the alluring but also violating effect of American identity on the individual citizen; it is held out as an American ideal, yet often destroys identity rather than unifying it.

Henry, then, becomes "a perfect symbol of [Shepard's] vision of America," as critic Doris Auerbach describes him (49). Auerbach's comments stem from her

accurate observation that “Hackamore was seduced by the American dream of power and success which turned into the madness of the drive for power” (29); but Henry also represents a “perfect symbol” of the inherent conflict of American identity, and the escapist impulse which results. Whereas characters such as Emma and Wesley from *Curse of the Starving Class* represent the two urges fostered by the pressure of a national character (Emma attempts to escape *from* American identity while Wesley hopes to discard his unsatisfactory conditions and escape *to* it), Henry embodies both impulses in one. The contradictory compulsions both to escape and to embrace American identity tear Henry’s character apart, until he is no longer a character. As Raul explains to him, Henry’s attempts to escape America have caused him to cease to exist: “You’re nothing. You’re not even a ghost. You don’t even exist, Henry. You’ve disappeared off the face of the earth” (272). By this point in the play, Henry becomes dissociated not only from the outside world and from his own sense of identity, but also from his very body. In a panic, Henry cries out “It’s not even my hand! My body! Whose body is this?” (274). The divisive impulses triggered by the paradoxical nature of American identity instigate the self-destruction of the individual.

Ultimately, Henry comes to recognize his own status as the “perfect symbol” of an American paradox. In a typically chaotic Shepard final scene, Henry resists Raul’s attempts to control him (in a scene strongly reminiscent of the final scene between Doc and Kent in *La Turista*) and articulates his newfound understanding of what he represents: “A ghost in the land. [...] A phantom they’ll never get rid of. I’m the demon they invented! Everything they ever aspired to. The nightmare of the nation!

It's me, Raul!" (275). Henry represents both the fulfillment and the failure of American character. His inability to reconcile the disparate impulses engendered by his quest for national identity leads directly to his physical demise, a fate that all Americans face, according to Shepard. From his earliest full-length plays to *Curse of the Starving Class*, his plays consistently remind his audiences of the impossibility of achieving American identity.

Conclusion

In *Hawk Moon*, his 1973 book of short stories, poems, and monologues, Shepard loosely articulates the same sentiment that will manifest itself in the character of Henry in *Seduced* just a few years later. "Horse Thieves," a short, image-laden prose piece from the collection, identifies a single moment of emotion:

Horse thieves in dark black to match the day hands and knees through
crawdad brook horsefly grass brush silent signals split and circle old corral
with pinto black and bay heads down munching oats switching blue blow flies
closing in sliding up like old friends touch blankets flanks twitch wild eyes
head up jerks and circles once then stops takes hackamore rope bit in teeth
bites loose then both swing up and jump clear running wild out straight for
blue space rifles blazing tongues amazed at wind and free strong power
headlong into who knows where. (19)

Shepard is at his best when he speaks in images; in his plays and prose, they offer him the opportunity to convey a feeling, some primal instinct that lurks within us. The single image of a domesticated horse desperately seeking to spit out its restraining bit and escape "headlong into who knows where" offers audiences and readers insight into Shepard's entire position on the modern American, especially when Shepard labels his representative American "Henry Hackamore."

Henry's very name provides evidence of the power that American identity has over its citizens. Some critics, such as Martin Tucker, have argued that Hackamore's name symbolizes Henry's power over others. Tucker asserts that "Shepard gives to his protagonist, Henry Hackamore, the name of a rope device, *hackamore*, designed to break horses; the resulting image is one of power and ability to constrain and manipulate other creatures" (112). But since Henry is the bearer of the name *hackamore*, it seems more likely that he is the one being controlled by a greater force. The image remains one of constraint and manipulation, but Henry is the enslaved, not the enslaver.

Henry serves as perhaps Shepard's most explicit representation of the consequences of the paradox of American identity. He exemplifies what all of Shepard's early characters experience in their failed quest for identity. Like all Americans, Henry is harnessed to a model of national identity that has become an impossibility. Within this context, the image of the *hackamore* encapsulates the control and power found in American character. With the bit and bridle in place, escape becomes a fleeting but irrepressible impulse for Americans struggling to free themselves from the domineering force of American identity.

Chapter Three

The Crisis of Confrontation

How far back can you go? A long line of corpses! There's not a living soul behind me. Not a one. Who's holding me in their memory? Who gives a damn about bones in the ground? (*Buried* 112)

Dodge, the grizzled, surly patriarch of the fractured family in *Buried Child* (1978) who utters these lines, has become completely dissociated from any true sense of identity. Calling himself “an invisible man” (68), he is profoundly disconnected from his immediate family even though they live under the same dilapidated roof (Shepard makes this disconnection evident from the opening curtain, where Dodge and Halie engage in a conversation that takes place on two separate floors of the house), and he is similarly disconnected from his ancestry, referring to his predecessors as “a long line of corpses.” Dodge refuses to admit that an individual's identity is severely affected (and perhaps even dictated) by previous generations. He seeks to deny both his heritage and the mistakes of his own personal past.

But as Dodge will discover, the past cannot be avoided, and he will be compelled to face the realization that an individual (and a nation) must recognize their history, bringing to light the reality of that past. He, as well as the other members of the family, will have to deal with the buried child that lies underneath the cornfield in the backyard, facing up to their past transgressions. The act of doing so, Shepard argues first in this play but then in many others, has the potential of being either destructive or redemptive, but must be done in order to reclaim a unified sense of character. Through his post-*Buried Child* corpus of plays and other writings, Shepard will

transfer this argument to America itself, asserting the need for the nation to acknowledge its violent, oppressive, and exclusionary past so that it will be possible to rediscover a sense of national identity.

Beginning with *Buried Child*, Shepard's characters, either voluntarily or forcibly, start examining the impact that past events have on an individual's identity.

Americans never truly escape national character because, Shepard argues, any attempt to do so represents a denial of the past, and will perpetuate the self-destructive American paradox of escape and return. Instead, Shepard's characters begin attempting to confront their conception of American character (represented in images of the farmer, pioneer and cowboy), exposing its inherent falsehood and limitations. This crisis of confrontation culminates in *States of Shock* (1992), Shepard's caustic response to America's involvement in the Gulf War; in this play, Shepard argues that the nation, like the individual, must acknowledge its own transgressions so that its citizens may begin seeking a more realistic and inclusive image of American identity.

Thus, *Buried Child* represents a distinct shift in Shepard's characters from escape to confrontation. Whereas Shepard's earlier plays (pre-*Buried Child*) consist of characters who will do anything to discover a sense of identity outside of an idealized national character, even leaping through the very boundaries of the stage in order to escape, beginning with *Buried Child* Shepard presents characters who, willingly or unwillingly, confront their paradoxical relationship to American identity. These plays, *True West*, *Fool for Love*, *A Lie of the Mind*, and *States of Shock*, all depict characters who are starting to realize that their efforts to escape are fruitless, or that

their efforts to embrace a national identity while simultaneously denying the reality of their past will never succeed.

This realization of the inescapability of American identity (and America's past) is a comprehension that pre-*Buried Child* characters never displayed. Not until *Buried Child* does Shepard begin to provide his characters with some insight into why they failed either to escape or embrace American identity. While their attempts to escape never completely dissipate (many of Shepard's post-*Buried Child* characters have already "escaped," and are experiencing the consequences of the endeavor), they begin to understand that a person's individual and generational history must be accounted for, even if that past is objectionable. From *Buried Child* forward, Shepard argues that Americans must acknowledge the influential effect of the past and admit to the truth of that history in order to recover any sense of identity, national or individual.

Turning Point: *Buried Child*

As *Buried Child* unfolds, no one wants to face up to the "truth" (a word that will be challenged by the murky and often conflicting pieces of information that sporadically emerge about the event in question). The barest details are these: after bearing Tilden and Bradley, Halie conceived another child; the possibility exists (and is at times overtly suggested) that the child is Tilden's;²⁰ the child was killed, presumably by Dodge, and buried in the backyard. All the family members seek to

²⁰ Despite the contradictions of the play, Shepard has overtly identified Tilden as the father of the buried child. Shepard's revised text, used in a 1996 Steppenwolf Theater production of the play, reveals Tilden's identity as father even more clearly. But even the original text indicts Tilden, as

deny the truth of any of this, yet through the course of the play they are forced to confront the memory of their actions.

As the play unfolds, each family member makes comments that become vague insinuations, hints at the revelation of secrets, and suggestions of a much deeper and darker knowledge of the other members. All conversations inevitably turn to the very issues everyone seeks to avoid. When Tilden enters carrying an armload of freshly picked corn and claims he got it from the field in the backyard (a field that both Dodge and Halie swear has not produced crops since 1935), Dodge thinks Tilden stole it and demands to know the source of the corn:

DODGE: I haven't had trouble with neighbors here for fifty-seven years. I don't even know who the neighbors are! And I don't wanna know! Now go put that corn back where it came from!
(TILDEN *stares at* DODGE *then walks slowly over to him and dumps all the corn on DODGE'S lap and steps back. DODGE stares at the corn then back to TILDEN. Long pause.*) (70)

The perplexed audience may not initially (or ever, given the convoluted manner in which Shepard reveals the “facts”) grasp the connections implied in Tilden’s actions: the corn (which Halie later confirms is growing “tall as a man already” [131]) was fertilized by the corpse of the baby that Dodge killed and buried in the backyard, so indirectly Dodge *is* the source of the corn. Dodge himself either does not understand or chooses to ignore the implications; the long pause lets the moment sink in, but Dodge then turns to the attack, deflecting attention away from his own past misdeeds and focusing the spotlight on Tilden:

DODGE: Are you having trouble here, Tilden! Are you in some kind of trouble?
TILDEN: I'm not in any trouble.

Shepard himself asserts: “It was always implicated that [Tilden] was, even in the original [production]” (Coen 28).

DODGE: You can tell me if you are. I'm still your father.
TILDEN: I know you're still my father.
DODGE: I know you had a little trouble back in New Mexico. That's why you came out here.
TILDEN: I never had any trouble.
DODGE: Tilden, your mother told me all about it.
TILDEN: What'd she tell you? [...]
DODGE: I don't have to repeat what she told me! She told me all about it!
(70)

Again, the audience learns only that Tilden, like Dodge, has his own dirty little secret(s), but is not offered any true revelation of what the two men are talking about. Here as in other scenes, Dodge demonstrates a reluctance to reveal any secret information about himself or anyone else. He is the one, after all, who buries the child in the first place, an ultimate act of concealment.

It seems surprising, then, that Dodge would make any mention of the buried child, let alone admit to fathering it, as he does when Halie rebukes him for denigrating their son Bradley, "your own flesh and blood," as Halie significantly describes it (76). Dodge angrily replies "He's not my flesh and blood! My flesh and blood's buried in the back yard!" (77). But Dodge's spontaneous confession serves only to confuse the situation more, since *Buried Child* provides ample evidence suggesting that Tilden is the real father of the dead child.²¹ His true intention here is to obfuscate the truth rather than reveal it.

Dodge's tendency to avoid facing the past at all cost becomes more apparent as he attempts to rebuff any inquiries into the true facts of the incident. When Tilden cryptically announces that he and everyone else in the household know the truth

²¹ Shepard's revisions of *Buried Child* for the Steppenwolf revival of the play serve to emphasize the themes of confrontation and discovery, as he pointed out in an interview in *American Theatre*: "I didn't want anything in the play to be gratuitously mysterious. And I felt that certain questions that

about the baby, Dodge responds “So what difference does it make? Everybody knows, everybody’s forgot” (77). But Dodge’s willingness and desire to put it all behind him are tested as Tilden presses on about the subject (but only in the vaguest of terms, referring to the incident only as “it” and “that”). Finally, Dodge refuses even to speak anymore, screaming

I don’t want to talk about anything! I don’t want to talk about troubles or what happened fifty years ago or thirty years ago or the race track or Florida or the last time I seeded the corn! I don’t want to talk!

TILDEN: You don’t wanna die do you?

DODGE: No, I don’t wanna die either.

TILDEN: Well, you gotta talk or you’ll die.

Pushed too close to addressing a reality of his past that he is reluctant to face, Dodge attempts to break off the conversation. He, like Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class*, believes that by disavowing the past, and then refusing to admit to or talk about it, he can erase it. Separating himself from his own history (both individual and familial), Dodge feels that “It’s much better not to know anything,” as he explains to his grandson Vince (88). Significantly, Dodge does not even recognize Vince, who has been away for six years, when he returns to the house. As Vince keeps trying to remind Dodge that they are related, Dodge yells “Stop calling me Grandpa will ya’! It’s sickening. ‘Grandpa.’ I’m nobody’s Grandpa!” (90). By refusing to recognize Vince as his grandson, Dodge attempts to sever himself from his lineage, insuring that Dodge will merely be the next in the “long line of corpses” that constitutes Dodge’s ancestry (112). Dodge’s death at the end of the play, which should “*come completely unnoticed*,” according to Shepard’s stage directions (131), emphasizes

were ignited in the play should find—not resolution, they shouldn’t be resolved—but they should be at least followed through” (Coen 28).

Dodge's lack of connection to his family, perhaps even more than had Shepard directed Dodge to die offstage.

But Dodge's determination to sever all ties to his family and to his past is continually undermined by Tilden and Vince, Tilden's legitimate son. While Dodge desperately seeks to avoid facing his past, Tilden understands that the past must be confronted in order for true healing and the rediscovery of identity to be possible. Tilden is the catalyst of discovery in the play; he forces the other family members to address the issues that they wish to repress (even if they never ultimately come to terms with those issues). Tilden is the one who brings in the corn from the lush field that Dodge and Halie both swear does not exist, dumping the evidence directly into Dodge's lap and forcing him to acknowledge its realness; Tilden is the one who, bit by bit, discloses the morbid family secrets to an outsider, Shelly (Vince's girlfriend), thus more publicly acknowledging the past while forcing the others to do the same. Tilden's efforts to force an encounter with the family secrets signify his desire to reconnect to the past that they have all tried to suppress. As Shelly comments, "It's so secret in fact, you're all convinced it never happened" (122). But the secret must be revealed; it cannot be ignored, and Tilden ends up doing exactly what Dodge fears, that someone will suddenly "bring everything out into the open after all these years" (122). In yet another memorable Shepard image, Tilden is the one who ultimately unearths the buried child and the concealed past, bringing the corpse, consisting mostly of "*bones wrapped in muddy, rotten cloth*," into the house in a final act of confrontation (132).

Like Tilden, Vince too seeks a reconnection with his past. But Vince, who seems to have no knowledge of the buried child, desires a reconnection to his familial past, searching to regain a lost heritage that he has suddenly come to believe in once more. Shelly explains to Dodge that “Vince has this thing about his family now. I guess it’s a new thing with him. I kind of find it hard to relate to. But he feels it’s important. You know. I mean he feels he wants to get to know you all again. After all this time” (86).

Vince himself attempts to articulate his newfound attachment to family in a broken monologue that echoes Weston’s rebirth speech from *Curse of the Starving Class*, a play written only a year earlier. Vince, who had disappeared the night before, returns, drunk and disheveled, because he realized he could not escape his heritage no matter how much he ran:

I studied my face. [...] As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him. Like a mummy’s face. I saw him dead and alive at the same time. In the same breath. [...] And then his face changed. His face became his father’s face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father’s face changed to his Grandfather’s face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I’d never seen before but still recognized. Still recognized the bones underneath. The eyes. The breath. The mouth. I followed my family clear into Iowa. Every last one. Straight into the Corn Belt and further. Straight back as far as they’d take me. Then it all dissolved. Everything dissolved. (130)

The fatalistic belief that Vince expresses, his total acceptance of his heritage and his inability to avoid it, suggests that he is no further from escaping to a new identity than Wesley was in *Curse*. Indeed, the curse of heredity that drives some of Shepard’s plays has been well discussed by Laura Graham, who calls the father-son dynamic in Shepard’s plays “the irreconcilable conflict” (15); Leslie Wade, who argues that Vince’s speech reveals “his inescapable identification with all the progenitors who

have preceded him” (*Shepard* 101); Stephen Bottoms; Ron Mottram and others. But Vince’s admission of an instinctual urge to connect to his heritage, along with a willingness to endeavor to do so, displays a type of progress for Shepard’s characters. While Wesley appropriates his father’s vile, vomit-stained clothes because “they fit me” (*Curse* 191), Vince actively seeks out generational connectivity. He shows more of a desire to embrace his ancestry rather than lament the inevitability of it. Immediately upon entering the house for the first time, Vince abandons Shelly, allowing her to fend for herself against Dodge’s hostility, while he goes upstairs to look at old family photos. And when faced with the choice of leaving with Shelly or staying as head of the household, Vince tells Shelly, “I’ve gotta carry on the line. I’ve gotta see to it that things keep rolling” (130). Vince accepts his role in the house and his position within a much larger family line with enthusiasm and anticipation. He displays a flicker of awareness similar to the epiphany that came too late to Weston: that a recognition of the people who precede you, and the influence they have over you, need not be a curse; it can be a source of redemption.

But Vince’s willingness to embrace his generational history is muted by his inability to recognize the *entire* history, including the family’s often brutal transgressions. Instead of attempting to atone for past misdeeds, Vince chooses to revel in them, glorifying the family’s violence and decrepitude. Upon his return to the house after a night of drunken wandering (a commonplace occurrence for a male Shepard character), he displays a proclivity for violence that was not present in his earlier scenes. Declaring his newly adopted identity, he “slashes his way into the

room through the screen door, viciously drives Bradley out of the house, and proceeds to announce that the entire family is as good as dead” (Bottoms 179-180).

Ironically, now both Dodge and Halie recognize Vince. Dodge promptly abdicates his position at the head of the household, telling Vince, “Go ahead! Take over the house! Take over the whole goddamn house! You can have it! It’s yours” (*Buried* 128). Bitterly, Dodge determines to “settle my affairs once and for all,” willing the house and “all the furnishings, accoutrements and paraphernalia therein” to Vince (128-129). Vince then immediately begins to plan his reign, even taking the tattered blanket that is continually coveted by Bradley and Dodge and throwing it around his shoulders like a royal robe (albeit one that is filthy and eroding, which is probably even more appropriate). Vince proclaims that “This is my house now, ya’ know? All mine. Everything. Except for the power tools and stuff. I’m gonna get all new equipment anyway. New plows, new tractor, everything. Start right off on the ground floor” (131). The bumper crop that suddenly appears in the backyard seems to correspond with Vince’s return to the household, supporting his claim of making a fresh start and implying that Vince’s sovereignty will be a bountiful one.

Yet Vince’s ascendance to the head of the family hardly seems like a positive outcome. And Tilden’s insistence on confronting the past by forcing the family to acknowledge the buried child suggests a chance for redemption, but ultimately it also seems like a failure. If the ultimate goal is to rediscover a coherent sense of identity, one that unifies the individual with a sense of national character, then both Vince and Tilden remain as lost as Shepard’s previous characters. While Vince demonstrates his willingness to embrace his past by expressing more desire to continue the family

line than Wesley did, he still fails to understand that merely accepting one's heritage is insufficient for regaining a true sense of identity. Vince's failure stems from his inability (or unwillingness) to admit to the atrocities of the family's history. Shepard makes it clear that Vince, like Wesley, will merely repeat the mistakes of the past generations rather than rectify or even address those mistakes. When Vince discovers Dodge's body, Vince "*lays down on the sofa, arms folded behind his head, staring at the ceiling. His body is in the same relationship to DODGE'S*" (131). Meanwhile, Halie continues to prattle away, talking to Vince exactly as if he was Dodge. The parallels, of course, are not unintentional. Vince has become the next Dodge, and the destructive cycle continues.

Tilden also fails in his attempts to rediscover identity. While his efforts at forcing a confrontation of memory are laudable, Shepard suggests, Tilden's obvious instability (Shepard describes Tilden as "*profoundly burned out and displaced*" [69]) and inability to function as a productive individual make him an unlikely candidate for resurrecting the family identity, let alone American character. Tilden, "a slow-witted child-man" (McDonough, *Masculinity* 53), cannot fulfill the role of redemptive force, and his inability to connect to his family ancestry allows Vince to supplant him as heir to the decrepit throne.

Tilden's failure, while occurring for different reasons, is related to Vince's. Both Tilden and Vince realize the necessity of accepting certain inevitabilities, the significant effect of the past upon the present and the deterministic nature of heredity, respectively. Yet both men fail because they do not understand that both elements, past actions *and* ancestry, are involved in the formation of identity. Vince assumes

his generational position, demonstrating a recognition of the role of those who came before him. But his acceptance, even approval, of the inherent violence of his ancestry (without acknowledging the sins of that past) reveals his unapologetic character. He refuses to see the results of the violent misdeeds of the past, as Shepard explicitly illustrates in his stage directions for the final scene: Tilden “*moves slowly downstage toward the staircase, ignoring VINCE on the sofa. VINCE keeps staring at the ceiling as though TILDEN wasn’t there. [...] [Tilden’s] eyes never leave the corpse of the child*” (132). Shepard’s directions here illustrate the different-yet-linked reasons for Tilden and Vince’s failure. Vince cannot (or will not) see the corpse and Tilden cannot (or will not) see anything but the corpse. Vince ignores the horrific reminder of past sins, while Tilden ignores his son and the death of his father. Tilden is the only character in *Buried Child* who never recognizes Vince; while Dodge and Halie both recognize Vince after his drunken return, Tilden never does. And when Shelly presses him, the closest Tilden can come to acknowledgement is “I thought I saw a face inside his face” (100).

Tilden’s glimmer of recognition, which resonates with the same generational interconnectivity that Vince espouses, suggests that Tilden is headed in the right direction, and Shepard portrays Tilden’s efforts sympathetically. A one time all-American football player, Tilden’s ability to function as a normal adult is questioned; Dodge claims that “Tilden can’t even protect himself!” (68). Bradley later encapsulates Tilden’s fall while talking with Shelly:

Doesn’t do a lick a’ work. Doesn’t raise a finger. [...] ‘Course, he used to be an All American. Quarterback or Fullback or somethin’. [...] Yeah, he used to be a big deal. Wore lettermen’s sweaters. Had medals hanging all around his neck. Real purty. Big deal. (105)

While Bradley denigrates Tilden, the audience is more likely to commiserate with him. His quiet demeanor and gentle mannerisms (as evidenced when he softly strokes Shelly's rabbit fur coat) arguably make Tilden the most likable character in a play full of self-absorbed, violent and mean family members. And Tilden is the one associated with the regeneration of the crops in the backyard.

Certainly, this final scene remains ambiguous; the regeneration, precipitated by the internment and subsequent unearthing of the dead child, offers the audience little in the way of coherent resolution (which is quite typical for Shepard's plays). Among critics, the final scene in *Buried Child* draws dissenting theories. Stephen Bottoms claims that "all that can ultimately be said is that the mysteries and contradictions of *Buried Child* seem to accumulate to form a [sic] unnerving (if heavily ironized) sense of doom" (180). Leslie Wade alternately believes that "the unearthing of the child may also be interpreted as an image of hope and redemption," pointing out that the Yale Repertory Theater Company "accentuated the lighter features of the piece and treated the bizarre occurrences of the household as 'on-going family comedy'" (*Shepard* 102). Ron Mottram also argues that the buried child "takes on the significance of hope," but complicates his own assertion by describing Tilden as a man who lives exclusively in the past: "Tilden lives in and even brings in vegetables from the fields of the past" (138-140). It seems appropriate that the open ending of *Buried Child* should elicit such a disparity in interpretations—*Buried Child* represents a moment of recognition (of the importance of individual and generational history) unaccompanied by a full understanding of how past sins must be redressed, not merely acknowledged. Although both Tilden and Vince represent an evolution in the

Shepard character, men who recognize the need to accept the influential effect of the past on present identity, they are unable fully to connect to that past, as has been discussed above. Vince's refusal to acknowledge the atrocity of the buried child and Tilden's refusal to acknowledge his own family insure that neither man will be able to forge ahead and reconnect to a unified sense of identity. The family secrets have been disclosed, but the remaining family members are not prepared to deal with the consequences.

Buried Child examines the effects of both past actions and familial history; but these are more than merely family secrets, in this case quite literal skeletons not from the closet but from the small grave in the backyard. Shepard implies that the same appraisal and inspection of history needs to apply to national identity as well. The most overt reference to this connection occurs when Vince and Shelly arrive at the house:

SHELLY: This is the house?

VINCE: This is the house.

SHELLY: I don't believe it!

VINCE: How come?

SHELLY: It's like a Norman Rockwell or something.

VINCE: What's a' matter with that? It's American. (83)

Shepard sets up his readers for a glimpse into a representative American family; but he soon dispels that idealized image. Later in the same scene Shelly has already changed her mind about this family:

SHELLY: This is terrible, Vince! I don't want to stay here. In this house. I thought it was going to be turkey dinners and apple pie and all that kinda stuff.

VINCE: Well I hate to disappoint you.

SHELLY: I'm not disappointed! I'm fuckin' terrified! (91)

As Shelly discovers, her vision of this ideal American family is not so ideal at all.

In his next few plays, Shepard more explicitly connects the family to the nation. He will use the framework of the family's struggle with its past explicitly to parallel the state of American identity itself. America must scrutinize its violent and exclusionary past, one that has consistently glossed over its sometimes brutal transgressions (such as Frederick Jackson Turner's attempts to portray Westward Expansion as a mostly peaceful appropriation of land, and the tendency to suppress the often brutal treatment of native Americans) while still evoking the spirit of the self-sufficient pioneer, thus glorifying an image that only displays half of the true national character.

“The Ring of Truth”: Illusion Versus Reality in *True West*

Like *Buried Child*, *True West* (1980) is a play about confrontation. With *True West*, Shepard places his characters, brothers Austin and Lee, in a fraternal battle in which they must face up to the “truth” behind life in America. Their conflict will reveal the image of an idealized American farmer/pioneer/cowboy as a construction that contrasts sharply with the reality of modern American experience. While creating a screenplay that portrays “something about the real West,” according to producer Saul (*True* 35), the brothers are forced to confront the reality of the West they live in, a world that bears little resemblance to the illusion they fabricate.

Shepard's opening stage directions inaugurate the illusion-reality contradiction that will permeate the play. His explicit note on the set and costuming specifies that “*the set should be constructed realistically, with no attempt to distort its dimensions, shapes, objects, or colors,*” and that “*the costumes should be exactly representative of*

who the characters are and not added onto for the sake of making a point to the audience” (3-4). Similarly, Shepard’s note on sound effects emphasizes that they should “*be treated realistically,*” down to the sounds of crickets as the play opens (4). While this stress on realism suggests that Shepard intends to depict the real West, such realistic elements stand in sharp contrast to the green synthetic grass that Shepard employs in the same stage directions. The bright shining artifice of the fake grass clashes with the attempts at realism. The house plants, “*mostly Boston ferns*” (3), further highlight the artificial nature of the scene. By choosing a plant that was transplanted from another area of the country (and shifted from its natural outdoor environment to an indoor flowerpot), Shepard reveals the set, and its representation of the West, to be a careful construction of image.

But Shepard’s most damning indictment of the illusory nature of the West, and of its embodiment of American identity, surfaces in the screenplay that Lee and Austin create. Promised by Hollywood producer Saul that he will look over the script, Lee enlists Austin to write Lee’s story, a “true-to-life Western” (19). The screenplay they concoct reads like a conglomeration of every Western cliché known to Hollywood. Lee’s scenario consists of two men chasing each other across the desert, first in trucks then on horses, before coming to a final, highly contrived showdown. Even as Austin writes it down, he recognizes how artificial the entire plot is, telling Lee, “It’s just a dumb excuse to get them into a chase scene” (22). While Austin criticizes the script for its conventions, Lee claims that the story captures an essence of truth:

AUSTIN: It’s too—

LEE: What? It’s too what? It’s too real! That’s what ya’ mean isn’t it? It’s too much like real life!

AUSTIN: It's not like real life! It's not enough like real life. Things don't happen like that. (21)

Eventually, even Lee comes to realize the artificial feel of the screenplay they create. When Austin reads the script back to him, Lee responds, "Whadya' call it when somethin's been said a thousand times before. Whadya' call that?" (51). The clichéd nature of the screenplay accentuates its trite construction. Lee's "true-to-life" contemporary western is little more than a fiction comprised of a pastiche of myth, cliché, and stock Hollywood imagery. Despite his earlier efforts to defend the screenplay's veracity, Lee's comments here suggest that he recognizes the illusory nature of American identity, and later in the play it will become evident that he is the brother who ultimately understands that the principles that he perceives as the buttress of American identity are nowhere to be found in the America in which they live. Lee decides to scrap the screenplay, explaining to Austin simply but pointedly, "you were right all along see. It is a dumb story" (56).

Yet this tale of a false West contains something that makes it a highly attractive commodity to Saul, whose job it is to package and produce images to sell to the American public. He agrees to read the script, saying that the story captures some inherent essence of America:

SAUL: It has the ring of truth, Austin.

AUSTIN: (*laughs*) Truth?

LEE: It is true.

SAUL: Something about the real West.

AUSTIN: Why? Because it's got horses? Because it's got grown men acting like little boys?

SAUL: Something about the land. Your brother is speaking from experience. (35)

Saul responds to something inherently American about the story, emphasizing the importance of its connection to the land, an element located at the heart of American identity. It is less clear why Saul originally agrees to produce the work of Lee, a shady drifter and criminal. As Don Shewey points out, “Something happens over a game of golf—you’re not sure whether the producer lost a bet or Lee threatened the guy” (131). But Saul’s interest in the screenplay appears genuine, as he offers \$300,000 just for a draft.

Saul’s belief in the authentic feel of the story signifies much more than just individual acceptance and endorsement of an American character. Since Saul is a representative of the film industry, his desire to package and market the images embodied in Lee’s “True West” screenplay implicates America’s cultural institutions as perpetuators of images of national identity. Saul’s position is reinforced by the big money that the studios are willing to offer to produce the screenplay. Telling Austin about the interest that the screenplay has generated in Hollywood, Saul remarks, “It’s incredible, Austin. We’ve got three different studios all trying to cut each other’s throats to get this material. In one morning. That’s how hot it is” (*True* 34). The studio interest indicates the commodification of American identity: it has become a marketing strategy, promoted to the public as a highly desirable image, as something to strive for. The overtly fake elements that comprise Lee’s true-to-life tale highlight the paradoxical situation that Americans face: they are being sold an image of an American that they cannot possibly achieve because it clearly represents fiction more than reality. This is the “truth” that Sam Shepard reveals for his audience.

When faced with the absurd artificiality of American identity, Lee and Austin are forced to confront their respective realities—two watered-down versions of a West that bears little resemblance to the vision they hold so dear. Critics have offered numerous descriptions that categorize the “real” Wests symbolized by the two brothers. Don Shewey identifies Austin as “a suburban husband-father and aspiring screenwriter—a tamed Wild Westerner,” while labeling Lee “a degenerate cowboy with a bulldog instead of a bronco” (Shewey 132). Similarly, William Kleb divides Austin and Lee into the “new west” and “old west,” respectively. The old west, Kleb observes, is “characterized by images of manliness, vigor, mobility, unpredictability, rootlessness, humor and violence,” while the new west consists of “suburbs and freeways; toasters and color TVs; Cocker Spaniels and house plants; Safeway” (Kleb 122).

While the various attempts to identify the Wests Lee and Austin represent are helpful in illustrating the contrast between the illusion and the brothers’ stark realities, such distinctions seem less important than the realization that all images of the West are doomed to failure in the face of the vision of the “true West” idealized in the screenplay. Both old and new west are unsatisfactory options, and when confronted with the disparity between their vision of American identity and the misery of their actual lives, both Austin and Lee admit to their disillusionment. Calling the West “a dead issue” (35), Austin describes his dissociation from identity, claiming,

There’s nothin’ down here for me. There never was. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar. Wandering down streets I thought I recognized that turn out to be replicas of

streets I remember. Streets I misremember. [...] There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me! (49).

Austin's sense of dislocation is apparent. He no longer recognizes his surroundings, and has lost touch with a part of himself that constitutes his very identity.

Similarly, Lee seeks the same escape from his life, and indicates a desire to obtain the type of life that Austin possesses. Admitting that "I always wondered what'd be like to be you," Lee expresses a desire to live a "sweet kinda' surburban silence":

Like a paradise. Kinda' place that sorta' kills ya' inside. Warm yellow lights. Mexican tile all around. Copper pots hangin' over the stove. Ya' know like they got in the magazines. Blonde people movin' in and outa' the rooms, talkin' to each other. (*pause*) Kinda' place you wish you sorta' grew up in, ya' know. (12)

While each brother experiences a brief flicker of recognition of the illusory nature of American identity, ultimately neither man can abandon that vision. Lee goes right back to his degenerate cowboy ways. He intends to return to the desert, and Shepard offers no evidence that any change has occurred. And Austin's own protestation that "There's no such thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue!" sounds hollow because he clearly still clings to aspirations of achieving that cowboy life (35), as he indicates when he asks to go with Lee out on the desert. Imagining the adventures Lee must be having, Austin "used to say to myself, 'Lee's got the right idea. He's out there in the world and here I am. What am I doing?'" (26). Austin longs to return to the pioneering, self-sufficient spirit found in the way of the cowboy, and even attempts to obtain his goal through violence (a common occurrence in Shepard plays), as he chokes his brother in an effort to escape out to the desert: "I'm goin' to the desert. There's nothing stopping me. I'm going by myself to the desert" (58). He

dreams of American identity as much as anyone; something in the screenplay attracts him, as it offers a vision of America that appeals to his sensibilities.

In fact, by the end of the play Austin adamantly defends that vision of the West. He is so desperate to maintain that image of American identity that when Lee announces he's abandoning the screenplay, Austin is prepared to kill Lee rather than let that happen, choking Lee with a telephone cord while discussing his intentions to go out on the desert to live out his dream. But his ability to succeed at this is immediately challenged by the final image of the play. Austin, after nearly choking Lee to death, slowly steps off his immobile body and tentatively steps away. Lee jumps up and blocks Austin's exit, as the two brothers square off, ironically mimicking the showdown between the two cowboys in the screenplay.

Austin is willing to kill to defend his vision, but the final image suggest that the brothers are deadlocked; the two men will destroy each other in their attempts to rediscover a sense of identity. Shepard's stage directions call for the two men to keep "*a distance between them. Pause, a single coyote heard in distance, lights fade softly into moonlight, the figures of the brothers now appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape, they are very still but watchful for the next move, lights go slowly to black as the after-image of the brothers pulses in the dark*" (59). The final image emphasizes confrontation, as the brothers are forced to deal with what they both represent: American failures.

For Shepard, neither brother represents the "True West." Instead, the "real" West is embodied in the story Austin tells about their father. When Lee intimates that he

will “disappear” (a common desire in Shepard’s plays) if Austin helps him write his true-to-life western, Austin responds,

Nobody can disappear. The old man tried that. Look where it got him. He lost his teeth. [...] Yeah, he lost his real teeth one at a time. Woke up every morning with another tooth lying on the mattress. Finally, he decides he’s gotta’ get ‘em all pulled out but he doesn’t have any money. Middle of Arizona with no money and no insurance and every morning another tooth is lying on the mattress. So what does he do? [...] He begs the government. G.I. Bill or some damn thing. [...] They send him the money but it’s not enough money. Costs a lot to have all yer teeth yanked. [...] So he locates a Mexican dentist in Juarez who’ll do the whole thing for a song. [...] Dentist takes all his money and all his teeth. And there he is, in Mexico, with his gums sewed up and his pockets empty. (41-42)

While certainly a powerful story about the deterioration of their father, Austin’s story has a national significance as well. The disillusionment in America is evident in the old man’s desire to escape in the first place, in the inability of the government to assist a man who had served his country, and in the fact the he had to go to Mexico to accomplish his goal. Furthermore, the old man, who lives out on the desert much like Lee (and like Austin desires), presents a dismal view of the state of the West: toothless and broke. This destitute portrait constitutes the real West. As Austin astutely observes, “Now that’s a true story. True to life” (42).

A compelling image, the toothless old man represents a West, and thus an America in Shepard’s eyes,²² that has lost its bite. The hardy images of masculine self-sufficiency have lost their potency in the modern world, and the vision of the West has failed its inhabitants, who cannot connect to the land, the nation, or their

²² Shepard’s association of the West with national identity for America itself becomes clear enough through his continual elevation of the West (and the cowboy) to national myth. His own comments also explicitly reveal the connection of the West to a more authentic, truer way of life. He describes cowboys as “these guys, most of them really young, about 16 or 17, who decided they didn’t want to have anything to do with the East Coast, with that way of life, and took on this immense country...” (Chubb et al. 190).

own sense of identity as a result. While Lee and Austin are forced to recognize the failure of American identity, as well as its artificiality, they (much like the family in *Buried Child*) are not yet ready to acknowledge the implications, which makes them unable to undergo any change in their own character, let alone the nation's.

Fool for Love and A Lie of the Mind

Shepard's next two plays continue to explore the unreality of American identity, focusing on his characters' confrontations of past events that are so crucial to the formation of both individual and national identity. Both plays concentrate on the past's intrusion into the present, and the characters who are forced to come to terms with the "truth" of history.

In *Fool for Love* (1983), Eddie, described by one critic as "a stunt man and rodeo cowboy with the usual wanderlust and dreams of the male protagonist of a Shepard play" (Mottram 154), represents the reality of American identity: he has attempted to embrace the principles of a national character, acquiring some land which he intends to cultivate for a living. In an effort to persuade May, his on-again off-again lover, to join him, he paints a familiar portrait of American character:

I got a piece of ground up in Wyoming. [...] May, I got everything worked out. I been thinkin' about this for weeks. I'm gonna' move the trailer. Build a little pipe corral to keep the horses. Have a big vegetable garden. Some chickens maybe. (*Fool* 24-25)

His attire reflects his aspirations, as he dresses in the traditional Shepard cowboy guise that reappears throughout plays such as *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, *Suicide in B-Flat*, and *The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing His Wife*.

But Eddie also represents the dark and threatening underside of American identity. Shepard's stage directions regarding Eddie's appearance offer a significant commentary on the image of an American character that has faded in contemporary society. Eddie wears

Muddy, broken-down cowboy boots with silver gaffer's tape wrapped around them at the toe and instep, well-worn, faded, dirty jeans that smell like horse sweat. Brown western shirt with snaps. A pair of spurs dangles from his belt. When he walks, he limps lightly and gives the impression he's rarely off a horse. There's a peculiar broken-down quality about his body in general, as though he's aged long before his time. He's in his late thirties. (20)

Eddie, a portrait of a "broken-down" American identity held together with duct tape, suggests the pathetic nature of that image, and also indicates that the reality of that image is far more flawed than the idealized one promoted and perpetuated by America's culture and history. Unlike Cody in *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, who is heroically saved by an "authentic" vision of American character in the form of Cody's two cowboy brothers, Eddie's depiction of American identity contains the same authenticity but also exposes its weaknesses.

Eddie also embodies one of the most prominent weaknesses of American character: its inherent violence. His aggressive demeanor manifests itself in his every action. He often physically dominates the stage space when talking to May, as indicated by Shepard's directions where Eddie "*makes a move toward her. May retreats to extreme upstage-right corner of room clutching her pillow to her chest*" (22). And intermittently throughout the play, Eddie "*moves violently toward her*" (28). May's defensive reactions establish Eddie's threatening personality.²³ And

²³ May, to her credit, sometimes achieves control over Eddie, both physically and emotionally. As she and Eddie engage in a mutual embrace, she "*pulls away from him slightly. Smiles. She looks him straight in the eyes, then suddenly knees him in the groin with tremendous force. EDDIE doubles over*

Eddie's domineering behavior around Martin (May's current boyfriend), such as going to get a shotgun from his truck when May tells Eddie that Martin is coming, and later threatening to "nail his ass to the floor" (35), again exemplifies his violent temperament. This violence becomes a hallmark of Shepard's American. And, again unlike *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, *Fool for Love* provides no illusion of glory surrounding the violence (a disclosure that Shepard will most fully examine in *States of Shock*). Eddie's violence merely looks ugly and mean.

Eddie's portrayal of national character also reveals what Shepard believes is the inevitable consequence of the quest for a national identity—the American escapist impulse. A constant escape artist, Eddie has abandoned May repeatedly in the past, compelling her to lament his very presence every time he returns. "It'll be the same thing over and over again," she says. "We'll be together for a little while and then you'll be gone" (*Fool* 31). In the opening lines of the play, in fact, Eddie attempts to assure May of his intentions to stay this time: "May, look. May? I'm not goin' anywhere. See? I'm right here. I'm not gone. Look" (21). Shepard makes it clear that Eddie has replayed this scene many times, creating a cyclical pattern of failed escape attempts.

Significantly, Eddie *is* present at the outset of *Fool for Love*. He signifies the return of the escaped man, a broken down vision of the American who still clings to a national identity that Shepard constantly exposes as inherently flawed. Always looking to yield to the escapist impulse that Kent articulates in *La Turista*, Eddie "just disappeared," as May reminds him, whenever the urge struck (*Fool* 25).

and drops like a rock. She stands over him" (26). And later she will begin to take over the story that Eddie and the Old Man tell, forcing them to acknowledge details they would rather leave out.

But May has begun to recognize the defective nature of American identity that Eddie represents, and she challenges the authority of that identity in an effort to expose its unreality. While still undeniably drawn to Eddie (the dynamic of their relationship alternates between tender reverie and violent confrontation), she attempts to resist his power to control her. When Eddie reveals his intention to take May with him to his “piece of ground” in Wyoming and never let her go again, she rebels:

MAY: You never had ahold of me to begin with. *(pause)* How many times have you done this to me?

EDDIE: What. [sic]

MAY: Suckered me into some dumb little fantasy and then dropped me like a hot rock. How many times has that happened?

EDDIE: It's no fantasy.

MAY: It's all fantasy. (25)

Her acknowledgement of the impossibility of Eddie's vision of American identity demonstrates an awareness that Shepard's earlier characters never displayed. For Shepard, this recognition marks an important step in the recovery of identity.

May moves beyond merely recognizing the illusory construction of American character embodied by Eddie, as she actively seeks to dispel the false principles that Eddie espouses. Reacting against Eddie's professed desire to run a farm, May screams “I hate chickens! I hate horses! I hate all that shit! You know that. You get me confused with somebody else. You keep comin' up here with this lame country dream life with chickens and vegetables and I can't stand any of it. It makes me puke to even think about it” (25). May summarily rejects Eddie's idealized vision of American life, an action that begins to suggest the limiting and exclusionary nature of American character.²⁴ Not every American wants to be a cowboy.

²⁴ May's outburst will be echoed by Cecilia in *Simpatico* (1995), who claims that “‘Americana' bores the shit out of me. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Who are they kidding?” (*Simpatico* 38).

May's admission of the reality of American character results in forced revelations of the "truth" of that identity. Eddie is compelled to acknowledge details about the past that had previously been suppressed. Eddie begins telling Martin, who comes to take May to the movies, the story of how Eddie and May met. But the story becomes more focused on the Old Man, who turns out to be the father of both May and Eddie. (The Old Man and Eddie represent yet another version of the cyclical and deterministic nature of the father/son relationship that appeared in Weston/Wesley, Dodge/Vince, and the Boy/Man characters from Shepard's 1968 play *Rock Garden*, among others.) Eddie's tale depicts "the male side a' this thing" (54), as the Old Man describes it, controlling the story and manipulating the events for his own purposes. But May intervenes in the storytelling process, forcing Eddie to realize that the past he recollects is only a partial version of the truth. She explains to Martin that Eddie's story contains as much fiction as fact:

MAY: He's told me that story a thousand times and it always changes.

EDDIE: I never repeat myself.

MAY: You do nothing but repeat yourself. That's all you do. You just go in a big circle.

May's comments suggest the cyclical nature of the quest for American character.

Eddie becomes caught up in the same self-defeating pattern that plagues many Shepard characters, reinscribing the very principles that lead them to seek escape.

Eddie's tale offers an excuse for the Old Man's behavior. The Old Man, who maintained two completely separate families, and was ultimately the cause of Eddie and May's incestuous relationship, is portrayed sympathetically throughout Eddie's recounting of events. According to Eddie, the Old Man simply "fell in love twice. That's basically how it happened. Once with my mother and once with her mother"

(48). Eddie's account excuses many of the Old Man's misdeeds, and conveniently leaves out details that would prove more damning to his character.

But May interjects, breaking into Eddie's story to fill in the omitted details. She takes control of the story, forcing the Old Man to protest "Boy, is she ever off the wall with this one. You gotta' do somethin' about this" (53). Eddie and May begin to counter each other with dueling versions of the story, but May begins to prevail in the exchange, forcing Eddie to confront the details of his and the Old Man's past that both men would rather suppress. As May continues to reveal "the whole rest of the story" as she describes it (52), the Old Man orders Eddie to silence her: "Stand up! Get on yer feet now goddammit! I wanna' hear the male side a' this thing. You gotta' represent me now. Speak on my behalf. There's no one to speak for me now! Stand up!" (54).²⁵

Prophetically, the Old Man correctly understands that May's rejection of the partial truth

that he and Eddie maintain represents a challenge to their established authority and the principles they espouse. May's denunciation of Eddie's "lame country dream life" suggests an awareness that some of Shepard's characters are beginning to gain: the deceptive illusion that props up American identity as a national commonality masks "the whole rest of the story." She refutes the notion of a unified American character that all citizens can identify with and aspire to.

The results of May's forcing Eddie and the Old Man to face the "whole rest of the story," the reality of their past, become obscured by the typical Shepard ambiguity

and resistance to resolution. (Shepard has famously commented that “a resolution isn’t an ending; it’s a strangulation” [Lippman 11].) Eddie demonstrates a willingness to accept the entire past, and not just selected favorable details, when he begins to side with May’s version of events, prompting the Old Man to cry, “You two can’t come together! You gotta’ hold up my end a’ this deal. I got nobody now! Nobody! You can’t betray me! You gotta’ represent me now! You’re my son!” (55). Significantly, Eddie appears to break the cycle of lineage that Shepard has continually asserted greatly contributes to determining identity.

But at the first distraction (albeit a large one, in the form of Eddie’s purported mistress, “the Countess,” who destroys Eddie’s truck in an offstage explosion), Eddie pulls his escape act once again. Telling May he’s “only gonna be a second” (56), Eddie disappears. “He’s gone,” May says simply as she begins packing her belongings in her suitcase (56). As May leaves, the Old Man remains on stage to deliver the closing lines, seeming to suggest that the established authority has been reasserted, and that May and Eddie will violently reunite in another seedy motel room in another remote location similar to “*the edge of the Mojave desert*” that forms the backdrop for *Fool for Love* (Fool 19). While Leslie Wade is correct to point out that the cyclical nature of the play “is a disturbing feature of the drama, since it conveys a deterministic understanding of gender conflict” (Shepard 122), the ending also suggests the unavoidable influence of American character. Eddie informs May, “You know we’re connected, May. We’ll always be connected. That was decided a long time ago” (31). His ominous warning indicates that the presence of an idealized

²⁵ May’s representation of the female “side a’ this thing” indicates Shepard’s burgeoning interest in a new form of American identity, one which is more accessible to women and minorities. Shepard’s

vision of national character will persist. May shows a desire to reveal the whole rest of the story, but Eddie, American cowboy, will continue to make his presence felt.

But *Fool for Love* represents a sort of progress for Shepard, continuing the attempt to reconcile the illusion of American identity with the reality of American life. The willingness to confront the fallacious nature of American identity is an important first step, Shepard argues, and necessary in order for any recovery of identity, national or individual, to occur. Shepard examines this theme further in his next play, *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), which even more overtly parallels the individual's recognition of the "whole rest of the story" of his past to America's need to achieve the same awareness.

Much like Eddie, Jake in *A Lie of the Mind* represents Shepard's conception of the failed state of the American, exemplifying the consequences of attempting to achieve his image of American identity. The glorified image of the hardy pioneer is overwhelmed by violent impulses and the inability to recognize the source and consequences of that violence. Within minutes of the opening curtain, the audience of *A Lie of the Mind* immediately learns of Jake's aggressive behavior. Calling his brother Frankie from a payphone, he agitatedly recounts the beating he just inflicted upon his wife, Beth: "She's not gonna pull outa this one, Frankie. She's not gonna. I saw her face. It was bad this time. Real bad. [...] All red and black and blue" (*Lie* 4). Jake's comments indicate the consistency of his violent impulses, a fact augmented by Jake's behavior while on the phone. Unable to control his rage even while talking to his brother, he repeatedly smashes the receiver down on the payphone.

vision of a more inclusive national character will be examined in chapter four.

But like so many Shepard characters, Jake cannot recognize that the violence that permeates his character is an inherent element of his identity. During his phone call to Frankie, Jake questions his violent impulses, repeatedly saying “I never even seen it comin’. I shoulda known. Why didn’t I see it comin’. I been good for so long” (4). Frankie, of course, has no answer for him, and shortly thereafter Jake says he has already put the incident behind him. Attempting to deny the ramifications of his violent history, much like Dodge and Vince did in *Buried Child*, Jake blames Beth for his ferocious outbursts, claiming that she was having an affair that prompted Jake to attack her. His efforts to deny his involvement, and thus his responsibility for his past actions, demonstrate his callous nature:

JAKE: I killed her. (*Pause*)

FRANKIE: You killed her.

JAKE: That’s right.

FRANKIE: She stopped breathing?

JAKE: Everything stopped. [...]

FRANKIE: Well, what’d you do? Did you call the police?

JAKE: Why would I do that? She was already dead. What could they do about it? [...] I done my time for her. I already done my time. (12-13)

With these words, Jake rejects any notion of personal accountability. He is willing to leave Beth for dead (she turns out to be severely brain damaged but alive) without concerning himself with the details.

Jake’s effort to dissociate himself from his past, along with his inexplicable yet ungovernable violent impulses, represent not only his personal failings, but also the inherent flaws of Shepard’s conception of national identity. Shepard emphasizes Jake’s representation of American character by draping him in the American flag toward the middle of the play. While looking over the contents of his childhood room, Jake finds the flag that was presented to him after the death of his father, which

he proceeds to wear “*draped around his neck*,” along with his father’s pilot’s jacket adorned with military medals (55). The medals and the flag symbolize the glory of America but ignore the dark undercurrent that appears in its citizens. Like Kent in *La Turista*, though, Jake’s American costume looks absurd because he is not wearing any pants (his mother, Lorraine, has hidden them from him to try to keep him from escaping the house). The image of the American that Jake portrays is a partial one, as is emphasized by Shepard’s comical use of the incomplete outfit.

Jake, however, will be forced to acknowledge the “whole rest of” American character. Mike, seeking revenge for his sister Beth’s predicament, tracks Jake down and subdues him. In a highly significant scene, Mike leads the now submissive Jake onto the stage; Jake, on his hands and knees, has the American flag in his mouth like a horse’s bit, with Mike holding on to the ends of the flag like reins. Having subdued Jake, Mike brings him to Beth so that he may atone for his past actions. Strongly reminiscent of the hackamore references in *Seduced* and Shepard’s short prose piece “Horse Thieves” from *Hawk Moon*, this scene graphically illustrates the restricting and debilitating effect of American identity on its citizens. In attempting to promote and enforce a distinct national character to which all society should aspire, America breaks its citizens much like a farmer uses a hackamore to break his horse. Mike even coos to Jake as if he was a farm animal, saying “Atta boy. You’re gonna do just fine. Pretty soon we can take you right out into the woods. Drag some timber. You’ll like that” (113). Mike’s use of Old Glory, the symbol of the nation and its ideologies, to restrain and control Jake emphasizes the impact of American identity on the American. In this context, “the flag has become, not a mythic emblem of

liberty, but a means of oppression” (Graham 158). Jake, like many Americans, is dominated by an unachievable vision that leads him like a farmer leads his plow horse. So while Jake’s violent temperament and abusive tendencies do not endear him to the audience, this particular scene casts him as the victim of a larger, overwhelming force. While not offering an excuse for Jake’s behavior, Shepard does seem to provide an explanation for it.

Shepard’s use of the flag in *A Lie of the Mind* overtly implicates America as being responsible for denying Americans the ability to achieve any sense of identity, national or individual, because it promotes an idealized vision of the pioneering, self-sufficient spirit while suppressing the violent reality of that image in our nation’s past. In this respect, *Lie* encapsulates the entire scope of American identity for Shepard: Americans are drawn to a vision of national identity; it restrains and ultimately destroys the individual, promoting an unattainable image of “the American”; and finally *Lie* attempts to salvage Old Glory, holding out the possibility that the flag (and American identity) play an important and potentially redemptive role in society. As the play progresses, the flag becomes more physically prominent, as it becomes a major focus of attention for both the audience and characters in the play. On its first appearance in the play, the flag is produced by Jake’s sister Sally, who finds it “*folded in a triangle military-style*” underneath Jake’s childhood bed along with their father’s war medals and flight jacket (36). “Dusty,” Jake comments, summing up with a single word the state of an American identity that seems outdated and inaccessible to society (36). But Jake’s reverence for the flag soon becomes apparent, as he wears it around his neck like a cape.

Shepard proceeds to utilize the flag to expose the detrimental consequences of American identity in the highly imagistic scene where Mike leads Jake onstage with the flag in Jake's mouth, as discussed above. Immediately after, Shepard alludes to the inherent violence that permeates national consciousness: after reining Jake in, Mike wraps the flag around his hunting rifle, explicitly connecting America to the violence which undergirds it; yet Shepard argues through such stage images that violence is concealed by the flag, providing a patriotic/nationalistic cover for the violence. The gun wrapped in the American flag exposes the deceptive nature of an American identity that conceals its objectionable qualities.

Ultimately, though, *A Lie of the Mind* leaves open the possibility of redemption for American identity, expressed through the flag's final image. Seeing Mike's use of the flag as a gun cover, his father Baylor chastises him for his actions. When Mike tries to point out that "it's just a flag" and that the more important issue is that Mike has captured "the guy who beat up your daughter" (116), Baylor angrily responds,

It's not just a flag. That's the flag of our nation. Isn't that the flag of our nation wrapped around that rifle? [...] You don't recognize the flag anymore? It's the same color it always was. They haven't changed it, have they? Maybe added a star or two but otherwise it's exactly the same. How could you not recognize it? [...] What do ya think yer doin', using the American flag like a grease rag. (116-117)

Once he has recovered the flag, Baylor continues to treat it with an awed reverence. Assisted by his wife Meg, Baylor proceeds to carefully fold the flag in the traditional military style, admonishing Meg, "Don't let it touch the ground now. Just back away from me and we'll stretch it out first. Don't let it touch the ground whatever you do" (120). By the end of the play, the flag has become almost sacrosanct, perhaps suggesting that its mythic value can somehow be recovered.

Given its widely diverging symbolism in *A Lie of the Mind*, the flag resists definitive interpretation, which suits Shepard's purposes in depicting a group of people whose future remains uncertain. While the play arguably contains a higher level of optimism than any previous Shepard work, it remains ambiguous, refusing to offer any lasting sense of resolution.

The two elements that are most often identified as providing evidence for optimism are the potentially gender-fluid relationship between Frankie and Beth and the reconnection between Baylor and Meg. Leslie Wade asserts that in *A Lie of the Mind* Shepard "intends a heretofore unseen degree of finality," one that "leaves the audience with a novel sense of closure, resolution, and for many, optimism" (Wade, *Shepard* 125). Wade specifically cites the "flag-folding ritual" as "the most striking feature of the play's conclusion":

The two kiss, for the first time, Meg reveals, in twenty years. Shepard here offers a moment of uncharacteristic tenderness, an impression of togetherness capped by Meg's final line. Beth's mother looks across the stage toward the burning mementos [Jake's mother] Lorraine and Sally ignited in the prior scene and remarks: "Looks like a fire in the snow. How could that be?" (p.131). This moment exhibits a subtle theatricalism on Shepard's part. The actor playing Meg actually sees a fire on the other side of the stage, and the line thus works to bridge the symbolic gap that traverses the scenic space [...] and the play thus leaves one with a note of reconciliation, despite the violence and division that has preceded. (*Shepard* 125-126)

While this final scene undoubtedly signifies a newfound tenderness and perhaps compassion between Meg and Baylor, any optimism felt by the audience should be tempered with a sense of caution that Shepard also infuses into the play. Baylor, who Wade herself points out is "another personification of the frontier mindset" (*Shepard* 124), demonstrates a weird and obsessive reverence for the flag; it encompasses his attention so completely that he ignores the confrontation that is occurring between

Meg and Jake right before his eyes. And while Baylor experiences a momentary affection for Meg, it is mitigated by his act of separation just before the final curtain. Baylor asks Meg if she's coming upstairs to bed, and when she says "I'll be up in a while," he replies, "Well, I'm goin' up. You shut the lights when you come. And don't dawdle. I don't wanna get woke up in the middle of a good dream" (122). Such requests indicate that Baylor has actually changed very little, and that he remains as self-absorbed as before. The physical distance between the two characters, with Baylor upstairs and Meg downstairs, recalls the opening of *Buried Child*, when Halie and Dodge carry on a conversation from two separate levels of the house. Finally, Meg's comment about "fire in the snow," to which Wade ascribes optimistic connotations, suggests disbelief and contradiction rather than acceptance or reconciliation. The conflicting image, in typical Shepard fashion, serves to convolute the ending rather than resolve it.

The second optimistic element that many critics single out in *A Lie of the Mind* is the progressive approach to gender roles that Beth and Frankie exhibit throughout the play, especially as it manifests itself in the concluding scenes. Stephen Bottoms argues that the fluidity of gender roles in the characters of Beth and Frankie provides a "positive potential" in the ability to overcome the restricting ramifications of identity (237). Bottoms asserts that some of the characters in *Lie* move beyond mere acceptance of the problems of the past, suggesting that "rather than simply seeking to heal wounds, many of the characters actually revolutionize their behavior" (239).

But once again, any optimism discovered in the transformative and redemptive potential of Shepard's characters' ability to refashion a new image of identity must be

assuaged by the playwright's ambivalent presentation of that possibility. While Beth's vision of Frankie becoming a "woman-man" replacing the typical American male (Jake, Mike, and Baylor) provides the image of a more inclusive American identity that eliminates its inherent violence, that vision is bought at too high a price. Beth's "enlightenment" comes only through her brutalization at the hands of Jake, Shepard's American. Physically and mentally, she has endured Jake's punishment and ultimately succeeded in moving beyond it, but at the cost of her psyche.

Furthermore, Beth's vision of a reformulated identity is rejected by everyone else in the play. As the play closes, Baylor and Meg ignore Beth completely. And Frankie, the only other character left on stage, renounces Beth after Jake tells her to stay with Frankie:

Jake! Wait a second. Jake! What're you doin'? [...] Jake, you gotta take her with you!! It's not true, Jake! She belongs to you! You gotta take her with you! I never betrayed you! I was true to you! (121)

Frankie's denunciation of Beth operates on an ideological level as well as a personal one. Frankie rejects Beth's "woman-man," instead choosing to maintain his loyalty to a national character represented by Jake. Not merely siding with his brother, Frankie also attempts to reassert Jake's authority as the American. While Beth envisions a better life for her and Frankie, Frankie treats Beth like an unwanted possession.

So the ending of *A Lie of the Mind* remains ambivalent. Yet Bottoms is correct to sense a "faint, strangely uplifting optimism" in the play (239). Perhaps the optimism here is that even though America's citizens have been mentally battered, they have survived and arrived at a place where the possibility for a reclamation of identity

exists. Certainly, Jake's willingness to abdicate his position as Beth's husband (and metaphorically as the flawed model of American identity) represents a newfound hope in Shepard's work. Jake admits the unreality of his vision of American character by exposing the illusion: "These things—in my head—lie to me. Everything lies. Tells me a story. Everything in me lies. But you. You stay. You are true. I know you now. You are true" (*Lie* 120). His readiness to remove himself from the picture opens up the possibility for change, even if that possibility ultimately goes unfulfilled.

States of Shock

Shepard's next play, *States of Shock* (1992), continues his effort to force the American psyche to its moment of crisis through a deliberate attempt at confrontation. Long awaited by both critics and theatergoers after *A Lie of the Mind*, *States of Shock* received less-than-glowing reviews, and closed after only two weeks (Willadt 163). *New Yorker* theater critic Mimi Kramer dismisses the play, lamenting the "bankruptcy of [...] Shepard's theatrical vocabulary" which results in a rather chaotic play (with seemingly inexplicable actions) that nonetheless seems wholly predictable (78), falling back on the traditional Shepard-esque pandemonium that appeared in earlier works such as *La Turista* and *Angel City*. *New York* critic John Simon similarly questions the absurdist nature of the characters' behavior, summarily denouncing the play as "arrant nonsense" which is "wholly pointless. [...] It just lurches in its loony way hither or yon, takes off mindlessly on this tack or that, throwing in anything thoughtlessness can think up when compelled to simulate

cogitation. [...] Forthwith, anything goes and nothing works” (71). Susanne Willadt even questions “if Shepard’s once extraordinary theatrical talent has not actually imploded” (148). The consensus was that Shepard’s new works were merely inferior echoes of his earlier material, and that at this stage of his career, Shepard had little new to offer.

Indeed, the play has its flaws. Characters seem flat. At times, the play is openly didactic. And Shepard’s departure from his prolonged study of the American family caught many critics and audiences off guard. With *States of Shock*, Shepard seems to move away from the more realistic and linear elements of his recent plays, beginning with the family plays and continuing through *A Lie of the Mind*. But his return to a turbulent, chaotic production never captures the spontaneity and freshness of Shepard’s plays from the late 1960s and 1970s. *States of Shock* creates more of an atmosphere of calculated mayhem, a sort of shock-for-shock’s-sake that compels Kramer to comment, “The point has been reached where the presence of [...] an ice-cream sundae or a bowl of soup predicates the creation of a mess” (78).

Shepard’s reaction to the harsh criticism of the play provides a telling insight into *States of Shock*, and how it connects to the rest of Shepard’s work. In an interview with Carol Rosen, Shepard suggests that the real problem critics had with *Shock* is that it was “so radically different from *A Lie of the Mind*” that they “couldn’t find a place to put it. ...Some of them called it absurdism or...They couldn’t fit it into anything” (qtd. in Willadt 148).

Though critics struggled to categorize *States of Shock* with some degree of comfort, the play actually represents a continuation of an explicit theme from *Lie* (and

all of Shepard's work after *Buried Child*): the confrontation of American identity. *Shock* contains Shepard's most overt attack on any notion of an established national identity, and contains a veiled sense of optimism that perhaps the restricting and exclusionary vision of American character may finally be altered.

The pretense for the action in *State of Shock* surrounds Colonel, who brings Stubbs, a disabled veteran injured in an unnamed war, to a "family restaurant" to memorialize the anniversary of Colonel's son's death (the son was killed in the same incident that crippled Stubbs, relegating him to a wheelchair).²⁶ But immediately after being seated in a booth, Colonel begins to reveal his true purpose for the occasion; he wants to revisit the fateful day that his son was killed, presumably by friendly fire, to find out the truth about what really happened. Colonel has even brought toy army men to help reconstruct the scene. Stubbs appears less than interested in recounting the details, but Colonel presses him on the matter, saying,

I want to reconstruct everything up to that moment. I know we've done this before, but there's certain particulars that still escape me. [...] What I'm trying to figure out is the exact configuration. The positions of each element. A catastrophe has to be examined from every possible angle. It has to be studied coldly, from the outside, without investing a lot of stupid emotion. [...] There's no point in running off in a huff. Sooner or later we have to face it. (*Shock* 13-14)

Colonel continues to emphasize the importance of confronting the situation, demanding to know all the details while eliminating any illusions about the event: "Pretending is not for us. What we're after is the hard facts. The bare bones" (15).

²⁶ Many of the details surrounding this account of the play's action are murky and convoluted in typical Shepard fashion. Throughout the play, there are seemingly nonsensical actions (such as the White Man, who had a bowl of clam chowder spilled into his lap, transforming the cleaning into a masturbatory act, and the strange group singing of "Good Night, Irene" toward the end of the play), and suggestions that Stubbs and the dead son are the same person (a point which is never wholly clarified). The erratic and sometimes inexplicable behavior displayed by many of the characters

And moments later, when Stubbs attempts to wheel himself off stage, Colonel orders him back, screaming “the situation has to be faced!” (19).

Other elements of the play reinforce its confrontational tone as well. The two live percussionists who provide the play with intense clashing sounds, mimicking battle sounds at some times and punctuating emphatic moments of speech at others, open the play with “*driving rhythms [that] slowly build in intensity as the cyclorama takes on an ominous tone*” (5). The combative sounds contribute to the atmosphere of conflict that permeates *States of Shock*. So, too, does the entire war motif: Stubbs and Colonel’s son are casualties of war; Colonel himself is dressed in military garb; the restaurant is under siege, complete with sounds of explosions and intense flashes of light provided by a cyclorama; the waitress announces that the manager is dead and the cook has been wounded, and describes what she did “when the first wave of missiles hit” (40); the set design itself establishes a dualism, as it situates the White Man and White Woman opposite each other at the only table, and the Colonel and Stubbs adopt the same position in the only booth when they make their entrance. And of course, the very presence of John Malkovich on stage, a veteran Shepard actor from *True West* (in which he played the temperamental Lee), guarantees high-voltage antagonism.²⁷ Clearly, the presiding atmosphere of *States of Shock* is one of conflict and confrontation, which accentuates Colonel’s incessant desire to “face the situation.”

prompted critic John Simon to opine that “Sam Shepard appears to have finally attained what he was aiming at all along: total incomprehensibility” (71).

²⁷ In a mostly critical review of *States of Shock*, Mimi Kramer suggested that the only people who should attend the play’s performance are theatergoers who “delight in seeing Mr. Malkovich do what he does best—namely, be unpleasant in an outlandish way” (78). While probably not intended as a compliment, it does speak to Malkovich’s successful ability to play aggressive, combative characters.

Ostensibly, the situation that Colonel wants faced is the battle in which his son died. But for Shepard, the confrontation takes places on a much larger scale: America, he argues, must face “the hard facts” about its own violent character and past, and examine the catastrophe of American identity “from every possible angle.” The nation must acknowledge that the idealized image of the pioneer/cowboy, one that has been lauded and promoted as a defining characteristic of the nation, has been sanitized to omit the egregious and brutal details of that identity. Only once its “hard facts” are exposed, and its restricting and exclusionary qualities revealed, will the nation’s citizens be able to reclaim any sense of identity.

Shepard makes this critique of national character explicit through his use of costuming, dialogue, and imagery. Upon their entrance on stage, Colonel and Stubbs’ roles are clear. Colonel enters

dressed in a strange ensemble of military uniforms and paraphernalia that have no apparent rhyme or reason: an air force captain’s khaki hat from WWII, a marine sergeant’s coat with various medals and pins dangling from the chest and shoulders, knickers with leather leggings below the knees, and a Civil War saber hanging from his waist. (Shock 5)

Colonel’s mixed garb indicates that although *States of Shock* may have been written as a response to America’s actions in the Gulf War, Shepard intended a much broader context for his indictment of the inherent violence of American identity.

Similarly, Stubbs’ appearance reveals his function. A war invalid, he is pushed onstage by Colonel “in a wheelchair with small American flags, raccoon tails, and various talismans and good-luck charms flapping and dangling from the back of the seat and armrests. STUBBS is [...] covered from the waist to the ankles with an old army blanket” (6). A victim of the pressure to conform to American identity, Stubbs

has been crippled by his inability to achieve the principles that supposedly define the nation. The relegation of the American flag, which has received an awed reverence in other Shepard plays, to merely another trinket or good-luck charm exemplifies the loss of idealism that Americans suffer in their relationship with their country. The glory and power which once radiated from the nation's symbol now occupy a place alongside the rest of the useless, ineffectual gewgaws that might hang from a car's rear-view mirror.

Much of the play's dialogue reinforces Colonel's and Stubbs' respective symbolic positions. Stubbs' comments establish him as the victim of the struggle to achieve American identity. Voicing the disillusionment echoed by so many Shepard characters, Stubbs recounts his dissociation while overseas fighting for his country: "It didn't smell American to me. It smelled like a foreign sea. The birds were not American birds. I wanted to have a feeling for home but nothing called me back. I wanted to have a memory" (19). Moments later, Stubbs succinctly articulates his (and Shepard's) perception of the problem as he crosses to centerstage to deliver his message directly to the audience: "America has disappeared" (20). In three words, Stubbs summarizes the separation Americans feel from the principles that supposedly define the nation.

Stubbs also embodies the results of the American struggle for identity, as his physical condition as an invalid mirrors his spiritual condition at the breakdown of American identity. "The middle of me is all dead," he informs the white couple. "The core. I'm eighty percent mutilated. The part of me that goes on living has no memory of the parts that are all dead" (14). Stubbs' remarks illustrate the division

between past events and present character, a rift that denies him any possibility of rediscovering a stable identity. His repeated declaration of his condition encapsulates the impotence that the American paradox of identity engenders in the nation's citizenry: "MY THING HANGS LIKE DEAD MEAT!" (12).

While Stubbs presents the view of the disillusioned and dissociated American, Colonel's language clearly positions him as the defender of national values, an ardent supporter of American identity. When Stubbs attempts to assert that the America he once believed in has disappeared, Colonel angrily and violently retorts, "DON'T TALK FOOLISHLY! That's a blasphemous thing to say! [...] The principles are enduring. You know that. This country wasn't founded on spineless, spur-of-the-moment whimsy. The effects are international! UNIVERSAL!" (20). Colonel's defensive rebuke is an overt attempt to reestablish the power and legacy of American identity. His comments reflect not only an effort to maintain the legitimacy and authority of national character, but they also reveal the deliberate construction of that identity. Perhaps unwittingly, the Colonel's defense of American identity exposes its function as the single model that all Americans should strive to achieve, a notion that Shepard has spent his entire dramatic career attempting to debunk.

In a continued effort to maintain his symbolic importance, Colonel attempts to revitalize the idealistic images of the pioneer/cowboy by recalling a glorious history of American lineage:

We can't forget that we were generated from the bravest stock. The Pioneer. The Mountain Man. The Plainsman. The Texas Ranger. The Lone Ranger. My son. These have not died in vain. These ones have not left us to wallow in various states of insanity and self-abuse. We have a legacy to continue, Stubbs. It's up to us. No one else is going to do it for us. Here's to them and to my son! A soldier for his nation! (24)

Colonel evokes a nationalistic heritage in hopes of retaining his control over Stubbs. When Stubbs continues to defy Colonel's commands, Colonel attempts violently to force Stubbs to submit to his will, all the while explaining that the beating is for the good of the country. As he takes off his belt, Colonel rationalizes, "Your arrogance is a slander on all that I stand for. All that I've slaved for. It's not just me, Stubbs. It's the principles. The codes. The entire infrastructure that you cast aspersions on. When I thrash you, you must remember this" (27). Like an abusive father "correcting" a disobedient child (a highly appropriate image for a Shepard play), Colonel seeks to influence Stubbs' very character, molding him into the image that Colonel wants.

Because of his overt desire to define Stubbs' identity, Colonel strikes a familiar chord as a Shepard character; he is strongly reminiscent of Doc from Shepard's first full-length play, *La Turista*. Much like Doc's efforts to construct an identity for his creature, Colonel's efforts to shape Stubbs' persona represent the same controlling force of a national character's attempts to impose itself on its citizens.

But much like Kent's rebellion against Doc's control, Stubbs demonstrates a resistance to the rigidity of that imposition of character. While still recognizing that he can never separate himself entirely from a national identity, Stubbs nevertheless shows a clear and deliberate move away from it, as evidenced by the final scene of the play. The ending of *States of Shock* has been either dismissed as nonsensical (by reviewers such as John Simon, who would like to dismiss the entire play) or viewed as pessimistic and "chilling," as Stephen Bottoms describes it (249). Bottoms, one of the few critics who addresses *States of Shock*, argues that the play's final image—

Stubbs, frozen in a moment in which, while wielding a saber, he hovers behind a clueless Colonel, seemingly preparing to decapitate him—reveals the play cynicism:

It is impossible to say whether this represents vengeance, revolution, or Oedipal patricide [...] but as a naked image of America's future it is perhaps even more unsettling than the similar image of mutual masculine enmity which had closed *True West*. The freeze is held throughout the closing "vaudeville" act, as the entire cast (except Stubbs) sing Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene": that quietly suicidal lament for unrecoverable dreams, juxtaposed starkly with that Damoclean sword hovering over Uncle Sam, wielded by his own "son," creates a chilling conclusion to an awkward but nonetheless provocative play. (249)

Bottoms' insightful analysis of the function of "Goodnight Irene" (Shepard's use of the song is one of the more challenging elements of an already convoluted play) and his comparison to the final image of *True West* both support his interpretation of the conclusion of *States of Shock* as negative; but many details of the play suggest that the final image, which indeed is a "chilling" visual, actually represents a tempered optimism about the potential for Americans to reclaim a sense of identity, and signifies progress in Shepard's long-running treatment of this theme.

The most overt indication of the positive nature of *States of Shock*'s conclusion appears in Stubbs himself. The very fact that he is able to stand above Colonel with a sword high above his head exemplifies his dramatic physical recovery, a sharp contrast to the invalid who was wheeled onstage at the play's opening.²⁸ Stubbs announces his miraculous revitalization while rolling around on the floor with Glory Bee, the diner's waitress, exclaiming, "my thing is coming back! [...] My thing is

²⁸ The frozen moment that ends the play resembles the final image of *True West*, but the dichotomy of the two moments contrasts sharply. While Austin and Lee's mirror images represent equality, with neither side having any advantage over the other, Stubbs' dominant position (standing and wielding a weapon) over Colonel (who resignedly sits in a wheelchair) indicates his control over the situation.

arising! I can feel it!” (*Shock* 42-43). The once impotent man (and American character) has begun to recover his sense of self.

At the same time he begins to revive his physicality, Stubbs also regains his memory, and is finally able to reveal the truth about what happened that fateful day when Stubbs and Colonel’s son were shot. Struck by his returning thoughts, Stubbs reveals that Colonel was present the day of the battle: “The part I remember—The part that’s coming back—is this. (*To COLONEL, on his knees.*) Your face. Your face leaning over my face. Peering down. [...] Your face, lying. Smiling and lying. Your bald face of denial. Peering down from a distance. Bombing me” (43). Stubbs explicitly connects Colonel with Stubbs’ own desperate condition, blaming Colonel for abandoning him. “YOU INVENTED MY DEATH!” Stubbs repeatedly cries (44), directly implicating Colonel as responsible for the disconnection and impotence that afflicts American character.

Moreover, much like Jake’s acquiescence at the close of *A Lie of the Mind*, Colonel’s ultimate willingness to acknowledge the truth of the past signifies a progression in Shepard’s work, one that allows for the possibility of the creation of a new form of identity. Colonel’s disclosure that “I was there. It’s true. Right by your side” (43), indicates his admission (albeit a grudging one) that the atrocities of the past cannot be suppressed indefinitely. Rather, they must be faced in order for new possibilities of identity to surface. The once strident Colonel ends the play sitting in the same wheelchair that Stubbs was previously confined to, an image that suggests that the American identity that Colonel represents is the real invalid, while Stubbs the

American has regained the possibility (but not the realization) of new frontiers in the formation of a national character.

The most overt indication of new frontiers is the dynamic between Stubbs, Colonel and the waitress, Glory Bee. Shepard's choice of names for Glory demonstrates his symbolic intent for that character, an intent that is revealed by the basic staging of the action in the play. Colonel is completely dissociated from Glory: upon hearing her name, he assumes it's French (what's significant about his guess about her nationality is not so much that he assumes she's French as that he cannot associate the name Glory with America); Colonel cannot recall her name when he wants to order a glass of water, yelling "Oh, miss! Miss! What the hell was her name? 'Bee' somebody?" (30)—the word he can't remember is glory; and when Colonel dreams up a scenario in which he and Glory run off together (Colonel wants to take her to Mexico, Shepard's favorite escapist destination), his plans are thwarted by Stubbs.

While Colonel is completely severed from Glory, Stubbs develops a strong connection to her. It is when he rolls around with Glory on the floor that his physical strength comes back, and she supports him in his early efforts to stand. Shepard's stage directions call for Glory to rush to Stubbs; as he totters unstably, she "*props him up before he has a chance to fall*" (36). Their connection becomes even more evident in the final scene. As the battle sounds intensify and the restaurant patrons prepare for an impending attack, Glory and Stubbs don gas masks, leaving Colonel and the white man to their fate (the white woman put one on earlier in the scene). While the Colonel may not survive the war taking place around him, Glory and Stubbs seem to

be prepared to endure the battle and come out alive, thus suggesting that glory can be returned to American character.

Conclusion

Sam Shepard's second book of prose and poetry, *Motel Chronicles* (1982), contains writings compiled from 1978 to 1982, roughly the same time period in which Shepard's characters began to undergo their transformation from escape artists to confronters, as they attempt to reclaim their lost sense of identity. Whereas Shepard's earlier collection of stories, *Hawk Moon*, mourns the steady loss of the West (and the character that springs from it) and resonates with a spirituality that emphasizes the importance of myth in society, *Motel Chronicles* serves to strip that myth from American identity. The elements of myth and the West still appear in *Chronicles*, but the pieces more frequently accentuate recognition, awareness, and the need to face issues rather than attempt to escape them.

The recognition that Shepard argues is an essential element in the recovery of identity consists of two major areas of revelation: Americans must recognize the artificiality of identity, and they must be aware of the character-shaping influence of individual and national heritage. Once the importance of these fundamental truths is understood, Americans will be able to formulate a more encompassing sense of identity, one that retains the essence of a national character while allowing for a broader definition of that identity. Shepard's plays following *States of Shock* (*Simpatico*, *Eyes for Consuela* and *The Late Henry Moss*) will address his vision of a more inclusive and accessible American character.

In *Motel Chronicles*, Shepard echoes the sentiment of recognition that appears in many of his plays from the same time period, such as *True West*, in which both Austin and Lee at various times admit to the falsity of American identity. Far from having a “ring of truth” to it (*True* 35), the American identity that emerges from Austin and Lee’s screenplay amounts to nothing more than “a dumb story” (56), suggesting that identity involves more performativity than actual substance (a notion that is further illustrated by the mutable identity shifts that Austin and Lee undergo). In a short poem from *Motel Chronicles*, written in Los Angeles, Shepard laments that

people here
have become
the people
they’re pretending to be (42)

And in a longer essay that describes an actor who is searching to understand the motivation for his character’s behavior, he comments on the feigned outward appearance of the other actors while off-camera, who “were trying harder to convince themselves than each other” (11). The rather cynical notion of identity as performance that emerges from *Motel Chronicles*, as well as Shepard’s plays, reveals his belief in the instability of the constructed images that individuals present to each other, a fact that must be exposed if any sense of identity is to be recovered.

The second aspect of awareness, the recognition of the inescapability of the past, is equally crucial to recovering identity, Shepard argues. In a short vignette from *Motel Chronicles*, Shepard recalls a visit to his father’s farm in which Shepard felt his familial connectivity:

When everyone’s asleep I wander around in the room upstairs staring at all the photographs of my Uncles. The Uncle who died in a motel room on his wedding night. His wife who died with him. The Uncle who lost a leg at the

age of ten. The Uncle who married into the Chicago Mafia. The Uncle who cut timber in the Great North Woods. The Uncle who drove for Bekins. The uncle who raised Springer Spaniels. All the Uncles who carry the bones of my Grandpa's face. (46)

Such moments of bonding to the past are clearly on Shepard's mind when he describes the heritage of his name.²⁹ "My name came down through seven generations of men" (49), he explains, and even if that name is changed, "that would be the name they'd die with" (49).³⁰

The realization of these two key aspects of identity, its constructed nature and the significance of the past in shaping character, allow for the possibility of creating a reformed model of identity. But Shepard asserts that the individual must be willing to face up to these aspects, and to deal with the transgressions of his past rather than avoiding them. *Motel Chronicles* closes with a series of stories about family, along with a large group photo of Shepard's family. Recalling a mundane day of sitting around the house with his family, he contemplates another escape: "These days I wonder about leaving. But I've seen myself when I leave. Already seen myself" (124). So while the escapist impulse still remains, it is not the irrepressible force it once was. By staying and facing his life rather than running from it, he breaks the cycle of escape and return that destroys so many of his plays' characters. In a free-verse poem mostly about staying home, Shepard comments, "maybe I should stay in one place and stay put and stop making up reasons to move" (123). The spirit of this

²⁹ Shepard's account of his familial heritage highlights his near-exclusive focus on male lineage. His description of his uncles parallels Vince's speech about "his whole race behind him" (*Buried* 130), and such passages reveal a limited perspective that concentrates solely on the male influence of heredity. Shepard will examine female lineage in a later film, *Far North*, which will be discussed in chapter four.

³⁰ Shepard was born Samuel Shepard Rogers. While some critics feel that Shepard's name change represents a break from "the patronymic chain" (Kroll et al. 70), Shepard's later writings (i.e., post-*Buried Child*) continually assert the inescapability of the heritage that family names signifies.

pronouncement emerges in the plays that Shepard writes during this time, from the attempts at return to the family that pervade *Buried Child* to the crisis of confrontation that informs *States of Shock*. Americans must be willing to face their lives, and the state of their identity, in order to recover the sense of self that has eluded them for so long. Shepard finally realizes that when it comes to the influence of the past (specifically the familial past), “there is no escape, [but] that the wholehearted acceptance of it leads to another possibility” (Rosen, “Territory” 8-9). To do so opens up the possibility for new experience, a “different kind of encounter” in Shepard’s words (*Motel 19*), and the chance to rebuild an identity for the nation.

Chapter Four

“Lock on to an image or you’ll be blown to KINGDOM COME”: An Identity Void

You carry this dream wherever you go so that you no longer see what’s right in front of you. And this dream is based on a lie, based on all the many lies; you actually believe this dream will somehow deliver you to the truth? I am sorry for you, Mr. Henry. I am sorry for your whole country. (*Eyes* 35)

In *Eyes for Consuela* (1998), Amado—a bandito who holds Henry hostage while he is in Mexico “to get away” from his life (36)—attempts to dispel a dream that Henry, and all Americans, harbor. Through the course of the play, Amado systematically strips the illusion away from Henry’s dream (a dream that, even in Henry’s eyes, was already fading). As the title indicates, *Eyes for Consuela* focuses heavily on issues of perception and seeing. In this play as well as Shepard’s others following *States of Shock*, he examines the state of an American populace that has been stripped of the images that had buttressed their perception of national identity for so long. The narrative of the farmer-pioneer-cowboy has finally been revealed for the half-truth that it is, and America can no longer ignore the violent and exclusionary nature of that character. In the above quote, Amado forces a confrontation of character that Henry seeks only to avoid, articulating a sentiment that Shepard argues applies to all of America.

In the aftermath of the crisis of confrontation that occurred in *States of Shock*, Shepard inserts his characters into a barren wasteland in his next play, *SimpatICO* (1995). Essentially, he asks, what happens when an identity that Americans once regarded as the narrative of the nation is no longer applicable in modern society?

Shepard argues that Americans must reconnect to a collective identity; they must establish a new narrative from which to draw their vision of American character. America must discard its outdated images of the farmer-pioneer-cowboy and find a new “essence of myth” (to use Shepard’s term). Throughout his career, Shepard has repeatedly suggested that Native American culture provides a good model for this essence, as such culture contains two important elements: 1) a strong attachment to the natural world and 2) an understanding of the connection between present and past generations.³¹ Although Shepard feels that the nation has not yet located its true essence, he displays a sense of optimism in his latest plays (specifically *Eyes for Consuela*) that suggests that a positive change is possible.

“The Edge of Nowhere”: *Simpatico*’s Wasteland

Simpatico presents an America completely stripped of its national myth of the farmer-pioneer-cowboy that has weighed heavily upon the nation’s consciousness since its inception. While the play’s characters react in different ways to the eradication of American identity (some still vainly attempt to cling to its precepts while others accept the loss), they are all forced to recognize that their concept of national character is not what it once was. The exposure of American identity that occurred in *States of Shock* has left a nebulous void, one that leaves an as-yet unfulfilled potential to revitalize both national and individual character.

This identity wasteland, Shepard argues, stems from America’s tendency to glorify its acts of strength and conquest throughout its history while minimizing or ignoring entirely the brutality and violence that often accompanied these pioneering

³¹ Shepard’s conception of the “essence of myth” will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.

activities. For Shepard, America's involvement in Operation Desert Storm and the subsequent Gulf War epitomized this behavior. In discussing the origins of *States of Shock*, Shepard points to the American desensitization toward violence that events such as the Gulf War promote:

I was in Kentucky when the war opened. I was in a bar...and it was stone silence. The TV was on, and these planes were coming in, and I had the sense that—it just seemed like doomsday to me. I could not believe the systematic kind of insensitivity of it. That there was this punitive attitude: we're going to just knock these people off the face of the earth.

And then it's devastating. Not only that, but they've convinced the American public that this was a good deed. ... the notion of this being a heroic event is just outrageous. I couldn't believe it. I still can't believe it. (Rosen, "Territory" 9)

Although Shepard does not elaborate on who "they" are, he seems to be directly implicating official institutions—specifically the government—for deliberately misleading the American public. Shepard's comments indicate his belief that America's representation of the Gulf War as a national act of heroism exposes the insidious manner in which the nation continues to foster an unrealistic and incomplete image of national identity. When America exults in its status as a defender of freedom while de-emphasizing the often violent and destructive consequences of its actions, it deliberately obscures the reality of the image it displays. It is this continued deception that instills in Americans a self-destructive escapist impulse. Victims of false advertising, they strive to achieve a vision of American identity that is only a half-truth; but the dark underbelly of national character is purposely concealed from public view.

Shepard's realization about the Gulf War is not particularly novel or unique; nor was he the only American who felt the Gulf War was conducted under false

pretenses—the protests that occurred throughout the country during Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm provide ample evidence of this. But for Shepard, the Gulf War is merely a recent and blatant example of a false image promoted and perpetuated by America's institutions. This is the same way he talks about the entire Western movement of Manifest Destiny: "The move westward was promoted by advertising. You know, 'Come West!' 'Free land!' 'Manifest Destiny.' So we've always been seduced by advertising" (Roudané, "Interview" 70). Such historical events serve as illustrations of America's illusory identity.

Using the Gulf War as a wake-up call, Shepard argues in his recent work that America's entire image is exposed by such events. Shepard's comments on the Gulf War reveal his belief that America's deception is deliberate; while lauding the nation's heroism (the concept of going in and kicking some ass certainly corresponds with America's cowboy way), America creates a "systematic kind of insensitivity" that obscures and even excuses its violent tendencies. When citizens can see this, they will become fully aware of the incompatibility of their established perception of American identity with their own lives.

Simpatico represents the aftermath of the struggle for identity depicted in *States of Shock*. In *Simpatico* the war is over, although some of the characters themselves do not realize it. Their vision of American identity has been exposed. As a result, Shepard situates his characters in a barren wasteland devoid of the illusion that had reinforced national character for so long. Shepard's bare stage, as suggested by his opening directions, corresponds to the character of a country that has been stripped of its national narrative:

Lights come up on—a cheap, ground-floor apartment on the outskirts of Cucamonga. A sign with this single place-name, “CUCAMONGA”, hangs above the set. The apartment is very sparse. [...] Rough stucco walls in pale green, absolutely bare with no attempt to decorate. [...] The windows look out into black space. No trees. No buildings. No landscape of any kind. Just black. (3)

Shepard's directions are reminiscent of his earliest full-length plays; the run-down apartment evokes the dilapidated Mexican hotel that Kent and Salem stay in (*La Turista*), and the blank, black stage recalls the isolated residence to which Henry Hackamore attempts to escape (*Seduced*). Significantly, though, those two plays were set outside of America. Both Kent and Henry sought to disappear, and fled the U.S. in order to do so. In *Sympatico*, however, that blank space is America itself. The nation that has been associated with its landscape since its formation³² is now relegated to identifying its space with placards containing place names. By providing “no landscape of any kind,” Shepard strips American character of one of its fundamental qualities.

Within this vast emptiness, Shepard places his characters and watches them struggle to find identity. Although national character has been stripped, many of his characters have yet to realize the implications (or perhaps they are unwilling to acknowledge the implications) of this exposure. Thus, they simply go through the motions, engaging in a half-hearted yet insistent effort to discover a vision of America they can identify with.

³² Recall, for example, Shepard's account of a conversation with a Swedish woman while on a train ride. While discussing the benefits of driving cross-country through America, the woman expresses her desire to see “that great landscape” that “haunts” Sweden (*Cruising* 178). Her instant connection of America with its land demonstrates the power and resonance of that particular narrative, as its image is known throughout the world.

Carter, a shady racehorse owner from Kentucky, seems to be one of those individuals who does realize the fallacious nature of national identity, but is also aware that most Americans still seek an idealized image. While trying to persuade Cecilia, a woman he has just met, to help him make a payoff, Carter offers her a trip to the Kentucky Derby as reward for her assistance:

“My Old Kentucky Home”? They sing that, you know. They all sing that. The masses. Even the ones who don’t know the words. Even the ones from Illinois and Wisconsin. They all want to be part of it. They’re all dying to belong to something old and rooted in American earth. They’re swept up in the frenzy. Have you ever felt that, Cecilia? Have you ever felt like throwing yourself to the dogs? (*Simpatic*85).

Carter’s entreaty reveals the strong desire of people to feel a sense of collective, national identity. Carter believes that “the masses” still display a compulsion to identify with an idealized American image, one “rooted in the American earth.” Such desires still reside in Cecilia, as she admits, responding, “I’ve dreamed about it” (85).

Carter’s language, though, implies that the dream is more of a nightmare, as people throw themselves to the dogs in order to obtain a sense of national identity. The threatening and violent imagery exposes the self-destructive nature of the search for American character. It is precisely this urge to “belong” to an image comprised of half-truths that Shepard argues Americans must resist.

While Carter’s rather sarcastic appeal to Cecilia’s sense of national community suggests that he himself is able to resist the trappings of American identity, his behavior is the most self-destructive of all of the characters. A prominent member of the horseracing scene, Carter obtained his position through deceit and nefarious deeds. His successful scheme—to blackmail a racing commissioner by setting him up in a compromising sexual situation and then taking photographs—forms the locus

of the play; the photographs and other evidence, enclosed in an innocuous shoebox, become the buried child of *Simpatico*, and they are evidence of the sins of the past that all the characters in the play will be forced to confront.

But Carter, like so many Shepard men before him, continually attempts to suppress the facts of the past. Unfortunately for Carter, his ex-partner-in-crime, Vinnie, refuses to allow Carter to forget. Carter has heretofore managed keep Vinnie quiet by buying him off and secreting him away “to the edge of nowhere” (as Vinnie describes it) in Cucamonga (19). But Vinnie serves as a continual reminder of Carter’s misdeeds. Able to compel Carter to travel across the country with a mere phone call (which is the premise of the opening scene of the play), Vinnie succinctly sums up Carter’s efforts to divorce himself from his own past, exposing Carter’s fraudulent attempts to project a genteel and upper-class image:

Like your seedy past is long forgot. Might never have really even taken place. Might have actually belonged to another man. A man so remote and dead to you that you’ve lost all connection. A man completely sacrificed in honor of your bogus membership in the High Life. (21)

As Shepard constantly reminds his audiences, the past is never really gone; it persists, shaping our present character. All of Carter’s actions throughout *Simpatico* stem from the same motivation: to suppress the details of the past that would expose his social and moral crimes. When his hush money payments to Vinnie no longer guarantee Vinnie’s silence, Carter flies to Cucamonga to try to convince him to keep quiet. Then Carter reluctantly agrees to help Vinnie repair his relationship with Cecilia. Finally, Carter breaks down entirely because of the pressure of the past’s influence; by the play’s final scene, Carter becomes a pathetic wreck, clad only in his underwear and huddled in a corner of Vinnie’s hotel room, whimpering about being

“completely cut off” (129). Reverting to the escapist impulse that destroyed many early Shepard characters, Carter seeks to withdraw from his life: “I’m going to change my name. [...] I’m going to disappear” (131).

But even as he utters these lines, Carter sits cowering in the corner of the room, unable to move, or even put his pants on. “I can’t walk,” he tells Vinnie. “I can hardly stand up” (128). Carter’s efforts to dissociate himself from the past ultimately cripple him, reducing him to a quivering shell of a man. He refuses to admit to any wrongdoing, specifically about his role in setting up Simms, a former racing commissioner, in a sexually compromising situation. At various times he blames vague external forces, “things that couldn’t be helped. [...] Things—beyond your control” (79), and at other times he implicates Simms as the creator of his own misfortune: “He didn’t need setting up! [...] All we did was document the truth. I’ve got no regrets about that, believe you me. No regrets whatsoever. Simms hung himself” (19). But Carter never acknowledges his own complicity, refusing even to look at the photographs that serve as a physical reminder of past transgressions. When Vinnie asks Carter if he would like to see the pictures, Carter vehemently responds “No! I would *not* like to see them again!” (19). He never acknowledges the critical importance of addressing the reality of his own history.

Vinnie, on the other hand, does understand. While certainly not an admirable character (he participated in the original scheme, extorted money from Carter, and has a run-in with the police over a woman—possibly Cecilia³³), he represents a distinct

³³ As with so many Shepard scenarios, the details of Carter and Cecilia’s relationship are deliberately obscured. Vinnie claims that Cecilia had him arrested: “‘Trespassing’. ‘Invasion of Privacy’. And uh—‘Harassment’” (8). But when Carter later asks Cecilia about the arrest, she responds, “Now why would I do something like that? We were having an affair, for Christ’s sake” (46).

progression in the Shepard character. Instead of trying to deny, suppress, or even embrace (in the futile manner of characters such as Vince or Wesley) the past, Vinnie seeks to put the past in its proper perspective; he treats history as an inseparable part of character from which he can learn to avoid the same mistakes. Vinnie is a man who is “fully aware of the weight of the past, the instability of identity, the cost of embroiling oneself in webs one can never escape from” (Bottoms 262-263).

Vinnie’s progression through the play illustrates his increasing understanding of the “weight of the past.” Initially, he is controlled by the past. Like so many Shepard characters before him (such as the entire family from *Buried Child*), Vinnie allows the events of the past to dictate his current behavior, as he is exiled to “the edge of nowhere.” But as the play progresses, Vinnie forces confrontation, seeking a way to move beyond the past by finally facing it. In three separate scenes, Vinnie confronts each other individual involved in the scandal (Carter, Simms and Rosie), forcing them to deal with their sordid history as a means of moving beyond it. Ultimately, Vinnie is able to come to terms with his past actions and create a reformed identity for himself (at the end of *Simpatico*, Vinnie announces that he is going to become a private investigator). His ability to revitalize his character stems from his perspective on the past.

Vinnie’s behavior demonstrates his willingness to face up to the past, and to use it to help him shape a new identity for himself. Vinnie possesses the physical evidence that incriminates all the participants (including himself) in the shared transgression. A seemingly innocuous shoebox—a far less shocking image than the rags and bones of *Buried Child* (but no less significant)—contains a collective past, one that each of

the characters has been avoiding since the day it happened. Through the course of the play, Vinnie will confront each accomplice with this shoebox; their various reactions determine their (in)ability to recover identity: Carter will attempt to suppress the contents of the box, denying the factual account of the incident; Carter's wife Rosie accepts the impact of the past on the present, claiming that each of them is in their own "little hell" because of their prior transgressions (102); and Simms discovers a way to reconcile the past, using it as a determiner of how to behave in the present.

Carter receives the first opportunity to redeem himself by confronting the truth of his past. As the play opens, Carter and Vinnie are meeting in a hotel room, apparently at Vinnie's behest (as possessor of the shoebox, Vinnie wields some influence). Vinnie offers Carter the shoebox, if Carter will help him fix his relationship with Cecilia. While Vinnie's trade request seems like an act of blackmail, it is more of an attempt to release the stranglehold that the past has on all of these characters. Vinnie, living off Carter's money, was already extorting Carter. The offer of the shoebox represents an effort to end the extortion and create a life that is informed but not controlled by the past. Vinnie wants to face up to their past, even suggesting that Carter turn himself in:

VINNIE: You walk right into the FBI and confess the whole fandango. Lay all your cards on the table. Worst they'll give you is a slap on the wrist and a little fine. Man of your position.

CARTER: What the hell good is that gonna do? What're you saying?

VINNIE: Let me off the hook.

CARTER: Let yourself off the hook. I'm not your jailer.

VINNIE: Let me off the hook, Carter! (17)

But Carter refuses publicly to admit complicity, and so the past he seeks so desperately to suppress continues to dictate all of his behavior. He agrees to visit

Cecilia on Vinnie's behalf, with the expectation that Vinnie will hand over the evidence afterwards. Despite Carter's continuous efforts to suppress the events of the past, the shoebox resurfaces constantly in *Simpatico*. After confronting Carter with the evidence, which Carter could not even bear to view, Vinnie pays a visit to Simms, the blackmailed commissioner who appears in the photographs, and then Rosie, Carter's wife and also the woman in the photos with Simms.

Much like his encounter with Carter, when Vinnie approaches Rosie with the shoebox, he explains that he is there to "set things straight" (99). Her initial reaction to the contents of the box is to drop them and physically distance herself from the evidence of her past. Vinnie assures her that he is not there to cause harm: "Now don't get excited. I was going to *give* them to you. [...] I was going to give it all back to you. You can burn it if you want to. I was going to trade you straight across" (100-101). Vinnie offers Rosie a deal: he will give Rosie the shoebox if she will "run off" with him (102) (Rosie and Vinnie were married before she left him to marry Carter). Rosie's reply indicates her position on the impact of the past. She dismisses Vinnie's foolish suggestion, telling him, "Give it up! Everything has already happened! It's already taken place. This is it. There's no 'running off' anymore. It's a done deal. You're in your little hell and I'm in mine" (102). Rosie's remarks reveal that she has come to terms with her past actions. Instead of futilely seeking to suppress or escape from the past, she recognizes that previous events shape present conditions. Her "little hell," like all of theirs, is of her own making, and she is prepared to deal with that. In fact, Rosie is incredulous that Vinnie cannot see it for himself:

ROSIE: Did you actually think—You didn't actually think that—

VINNIE: What?

ROSIE: That's unbelievable—after all this time. Mexico?

VINNIE: It was just an idea.

ROSIE: Mexico? (103)

While Rosie's disbelief at Vinnie's lack of vision and insight applies to the tangled history of all the main characters, her incredulity also exposes the lack of vision of the general American public ("the masses," as Carter calls them), people who continue to engage in self-destructive escapist behavior in a futile attempt to dissociate themselves from their past. Rosie recognizes the permanency of that past and the impossibility of escape, demonstrating an awareness that "the masses" still lack.

Vinnie's behavior in this scene seems to indicate his own delusional desires for escape, which suggests that he has not progressed beyond the masses, or beyond earlier Shepard characters such as Kent (*La Turista*), Weston and Wesley (*Curse of the Starving Class*), men who specifically seek Mexico as their destination.

Moreover, Vinnie's conversation with Rosie (similar to his meeting with Carter) reveals that he is not acting entirely altruistically; he clearly has his own agenda, and attempts to use the shoebox for his own profit. But Vinnie does exhibit noticeable signs of progress in his own quest to rediscover identity, and attempts to atone for his past transgressions. Although Vinnie does proposition Rosie to escape to Mexico with him, his vague offer sounds more than a bit hollow and halfhearted. He comments, "I was thinking maybe we could still run off together," and when Rosie asks him where they would go, he meekly offers, "I don't know. Mexico, maybe?" (102). His interest in his own plan lacks sincerity and conviction, as if his escapist

impulse is a knee-jerk reaction that he does not seem overly enthusiastic about.³⁴

And ultimately, Vinnie acts altruistically by relinquishing possession of the shoebox, which he simply hands over to Rosie. No longer seeking to profit from the contents of the box, Vinnie wants to put the past in its proper place so that he can move on with his life and, hopefully, recover a sense of identity at the same time.

Vinnie's most overt attempt at altruism is directed at Simms, the target of the blackmail scheme. His life as a reputable and influential racing commissioner was destroyed by the compromising photos taken of him and Rosie, so Simms would seem like the character most deserving and desirous of retribution. And Vinnie, aware of Simm's legitimate grievance, provides Simms the opportunity to exact revenge on those (including Vinnie himself) who wronged him. Bringing the shoebox to Simms' office (where Simms operates under the alias of Mr. "Ames"), Vinnie explains,

I've struck out on my own because I believe I could help this condemned man reinstate himself.

SIMMS: Vindication!

VINNIE: Yes. Exactly.

SIMMS: And he would, most likely, be very grateful for that. This poor man. This fallen soul. Most likely he would pay you a great deal of money.

VINNIE: I'm not interested in money. (62)

Simms doubts Vinnie's denial of financial intent in the transaction, so Vinnie tries to convince him, imploring, "but I could turn this whole thing around for Simms! He could be completely exonerated" (64). Unlike his proposal to Rosie, Vinnie's interest in rectifying his past misdeeds is sincere. His offer to exonerate Simms represents an

³⁴ Vinnie's unenthusiastic proposal to escape to Mexico contrasts sharply with the energetic optimism that earlier Shepard characters express about the same prospect. Wesley, Weston, and Emma all consider Mexico a place where it is possible to be reborn and assume a new identity. Weston describes

earnest attempt to redeem a “fallen soul” (62). Vinnie believes that Simms, or any man put in his position, would delight in the opportunity to exact vengeance; but he also believes that his act of beneficence will allow Vinnie himself to “set things straight” (99), as he later explains to Rosie, and redeem his own character. Vinnie eschews profit and personal welfare (the evidence implicates him, after all) to offer Simms an opportunity for justice.

But Simms refuses to succumb to thoughts of retribution. Instead, Simms has found a way to come to terms with the past, adopting an attitude of acceptance and contrition that has altered his entire perception of life. He reveals his newfound (and hard earned) mindset when Cecilia (who has been sent by Carter to try to buy the photos that Vinnie intended to sell to Simms) expresses her disgust at the perverted nature of the photographs:

CECILIA: How could you—have done something like that?

SIMMS: Like what?

CECILIA: Like what you did in those pictures. You don’t seem like the kind of man—

SIMMS: Well, some of us get caught with our pants down and some don’t. I was one of the lucky ones.

CECILIA: Lucky?

SIMMS: I got over it.

CECILIA: But you must have—suffered.

SIMMS: It’s all in the past. Now it’s their turn. (117-118)

Simms’ responses demonstrate a capacity for forgiveness and progress; his philosophical stance displays an acceptance of the past that neither Cecilia nor Vinnie (in the earlier scene) expected.³⁵ Simms, who was a victim but not an unwilling

it as “full of escape artists,” and naively believes “I can start a whole new life down there” (*Curse* 194). That optimism has been stripped away from the wasteland of identity found in *Simpatico*.

³⁵ Simms’ specific imagery (“some of us get caught with our pants down”) evokes Shepard’s characters who represent the troubled state of the American—Kent (*La Turista*), Jake (*A Lie of the*

participant in the sexual escapades that led to his downfall, recovers from his suffering and uses his misfortune as a rationale for how he treats others. While he claims that Vinnie and Carter will suffer, Simms will not involve himself in that endeavor. He has already been given an opportunity to torment those men (when Vinnie presents Simms with the shoebox), and has refused to participate. He asks Vinnie, “Why is blood more appealing than re-birth?” (61). His question indicates a rejection of the violent impulse for vengeance, instead opting for a more forgiving and optimistic perspective. It may be “their turn” to suffer, but it will not be at Simms’ hands.

Simms’ comment that his own suffering is “in the past,” along with his assumption of an alias, may seem to suggest that he avoids the past rather than facing it. He refuses to admit his true identity when Vinnie confronts him, and his denials to Vinnie can be interpreted as an effort to dissociate himself from his past, like so many earlier Shepard characters. When Vinnie offers Simms the chance for vengeance, he responds,

I’m not in the muckraking business, Mr. Webb. [...] I don’t give two shits about these festering souls and all their dirty laundry. I’m obsessed with my work. Can you understand that? [...] I’m so completely absorbed in my work that the outside world has disappeared. It’s vanished, Mr. Webb. I’m no longer seduced by its moaning and fanfare. (64)

But Simms’ apparent efforts to sever ties to his past and society are not motivated by an escapist impulse; rather, they represent an attempt to allow the past to influence, but not control, his identity. Simms, more than any other character in *Simpatico* (although Vinnie is learning the lessons that Simms already knows),

Mind) and even Carter—who appear onstage without pants. Shepard seems to use this image continually as a symbol of the American’s incompleteness.

demonstrates a complete awareness of the importance of the past as a factor in determining character. Significantly, his current profession involves studying racehorse bloodlines in order to establish pedigrees. Calling heredity “an endless chain,” Simms explains to Cecelia that his work with horse lineage has revealed to him “the glaring truth of it all”: “every single solitary thoroughbred horse in the world [...] and all those yet to be born are, in one way or another, related by blood. From the glue factory to the winner’s circle—each and every one of them carries some common factor” (104). Simms’ very profession entails an understanding of the importance of heredity and of the influence of the past on the present.

Simms applies the same “glaring truth” to people that he does to horses. When Cecelia thanks him for commenting that she is “in the Spring of life,” Simms replies, “Not your fault. It’s genetics. All in the genes. We’ve got nothing to do with it. It was all decided generations ago. Faceless ancestors” (109). So while recognizing the enormity of the past’s influence on an individual’s identity, Simms still manages to use the mistakes of the past as a guide for how to live in the present. In doing so, he represents a compelling yet incomplete image of a man who was successfully able to recreate his identity. Described by Stephen Bottoms as “one of Shepard’s most intriguing character creations,” Simms

knows that the past is something that cannot simply be wiped away, and so there is no point in trying. Here in Kentucky he has a new name and a new identity, but still, everything he is has been conditioned by the events of a personal history he cannot escape. (260, 261)

Simms’ attitude toward the past represents a new departure for a Shepard character.

Simms manages to recreate himself, establishing a new identity. His rebirth, something earlier Shepard characters desperately sought, is only possible because of

Simms' ability to come to terms with his past, which he uses as a determiner of how to act in the present and future.

By the end of the play, Vinnie clearly attempts to embark on a similar course to Simms'. Vinnie, who has already demonstrated a desire to come to terms with his own past (evident in his efforts to deal with the contents of the shoebox),³⁶ prepares to remake his character. No more extortion or shakedowns, he says when Carter makes him one final offer to keep quiet: "I don't want it all. I don't want anything you've got. You can stop sending me all your bullshit. [...] All your guilt money. You can keep all that" (132). Vinnie rejects "all that" to become a detective, and in doing so he rediscovers his own sense of identity:

I'm working on a new case. It's a great feeling to embark on a case. It fills me with purpose. I'm my own man again. [...] I see it all, Carter. I'm witness to it all. I see it through their windows. I see how helpless they all are. How they're all in the grips of something. And the great thing about this business is that there's no end to it. It's bottomless. Just imagine that. Right now, right this very second, someone is cutting someone else's throat. It's amazing. (134)

Vinnie has found a way to become a new man, to search for a self outside of a prescribed national identity that Shepard argues has constrained Americans for so long; Vinnie does not aspire to be a cowboy. As he proclaims himself "my own man again," Vinnie "*has all his detective gear on*" (134), and is ready to venture forth and embark on a revitalized career and life.

Vinnie's capacity to reconstruct his identity seems somewhat overshadowed by his rather cynical outlook on human behavior. And his willingness to capitalize on the misery of his fellow countrymen could be seen as an act that is just as cruel as the

blackmail in which he once participated. But Vinnie's description of the "helpless" people he encounters in his profession indicates a significant awareness of the state of the American people ("the masses" that Carter earlier identified). He recognizes "the grips" of despair that Americans feel (having himself been in their throes) and the violence that often accompanies them. However pessimistically, Vinnie displays a recognition of the true state of Americans. His conduct and his character are far from ideal. He reacts callously to Carter's breakdown (Carter ends the play huddled under a dirty blanket, reminiscent of Dodge and Tilden in *Buried Child*), telling Carter, "if you don't get up off my floor, I'm gonna drag your ass out into the road and leave you there" (132). Such behavior suggests that Vinnie has not acquired the capacity for tolerance and understanding that Simms exhibits. But Vinnie's and Simms' successful efforts to avoid the paradox of continual escape from and return to the same limited vision of American identity illustrate a tremendous achievement for Shepard characters.

Eyes for Consuela

While Simms and Vinnie manage to recognize the pathway to a reconstructed identity, "the masses" of Americans remain lost, "dying to belong to something old and rooted in American earth" (*Simpatico* 85). Carter, the first character in *Simpatico* to identify this impulse, represents the superficial attainment of American identity: he is a wealthy and prominent member of the social elite, he wields "tremendous power and influence" (102), as Rosie explains to Vinnie, and his work with

³⁶ It should be emphasized that while Vinnie and Simms both attempt to reconcile their individual pasts, their complex, intertwining relationships with every other character reveal the communal nature

thoroughbred horses connects him to the land. Not exactly Shepard's "Super Cowboy Man" (there is not much ruggedness in this man), Carter nevertheless embodies a gentrified American cowboy who works with horses yet does not ride them. Yet Carter is as lost as any of the masses, and by the end of the play the man who seemed to control his own fate lies quivering in the corner of Vinnie's isolated hotel room. His once-stable identity has collapsed around him, leaving him desperately seeking to escape by switching identities with Vinnie: "I'll take your place and you can have mine" (132). Vinnie, who knows better, rejects Carter's offer, and ultimately Carter is left alone in the room. Cecilia stops by to return Carter's money, and as she is leaving Carter's cell phone starts ringing. "Somebody ought to answer that," she says as she walks out, but Carter does not move or talk. Regardless of who is calling him (Rosie and Simms seem likely possibilities), he wants to disappear from everything connected to his old identity. This last-ditch escape attempt will be dramatized in Shepard's next play, *Eyes for Consuela* (1998).

While Shepard's decision to return to his examination of the escaped American (*Eyes for Consuela* takes place in a remote village in Mexico) may seem to prove his inability to move beyond the contradiction of the American escapist impulse, *Eyes* represents Shepard's most optimistic treatment of these issues. *Eyes for Consuela* is a play of redemption, wherein the individual American finally is able to return to a land of new possibility and the promise of a renewed sense of identity. *Eyes* is not a play about escape; rather, it is a play about vision (as even the title emphasizes) and perception; it is a play about opening one's eyes to both the reality of the past and to the potential to reclaim identity in the present.

of that past: the individual identity cannot be defined outside a larger, collective identity.

The play opens with a familiar Shepard scenario: Henry, a middle-aged, middle-class white man, has left his wife and retreated to a small rundown hotel in the middle of a Mexican jungle. While out on a midnight walk, he is accosted by Amado, a bandit who demands Henry's eyes, which Amado plans to give to his girlfriend Consuela as a gift. Amado wants Henry's eyes because he is convinced they are blue, and "around here they're hard to find" (*Eyes* 10); but Henry maintains that his eyes are brown. This disagreement becomes the center of much of the action in the play, a work that mostly consists of philosophical discussions between the two men on love, marriage, national differences, repentance, and other weighty issues (all of which surface in other Shepard plays as well). Ultimately, Henry is released unharmed but with a new sense of life, and as the play ends he is preparing to return to his wife in Michigan.

The main plot details of the storyline, and even some of the dialogue, are inspired by Octavio Paz's extremely short story "The Blue Bouquet" (1961); but Shepard infuses the original with his own style and thematic concerns. In fact, at first glance it appears as if *Eyes for Consuela* is merely a weak reiteration of the same Shepard characters engaging in the same futile cycle of failed escape and return, as exhibited in earlier characters such as Kent (*La Turista*), Henry Hackamore (*Seduced*), Eddie (*Fool for Love*), and Weston (*Curse of the Starving Class*). The notable similarities between *La Turista* and *Eyes for Consuela* prompted Ben Brantley to assert that the earlier *La Turista* contains a "vitality" that *Eyes* lacks, making the later play "feel weary" ("Blinding" E12). Indeed, Henry's professed desire "just to get away for a while" (*Eyes* 16), which mirrors Kent's urge "to just disappear for a while" (*Turista*

257), locates him squarely within typical Shepard territory. And in addition to his flight to Mexico and his escapist language, Henry's past—he is from Texas, “Home of the cowboys,” as he tells Amado (*Eyes* 30)—also suggests the image of the same dysfunctional cowboy American that pervades Shepard's works.

But these echoes of characters past only represent the initial aspects of Henry's character; by the end of the play, he has taken significant strides toward a new kind of character (one that Shepard only vaguely defines). Whether Henry will actually become a new man remains uncertain (in typical Shepard fashion), but *Eyes for Consuela* represents a highly optimistic ending, and Henry appears both ready and willing to see identity with new eyes.

Amado becomes the instigating force that compels Henry to adjust his perceptions. Sneaking up behind Henry and sticking a knife to his back, Amado physically restrains Henry, keeping him captive through the majority of the play. But more significantly, Amado challenges Henry to face facts about his life that Henry is reluctant to confront. Dismissing Henry's claim that he is in Mexico for a “new life” (17), Amado exposes Henry's escapist impulse:

AMADO: So—Mr. Henry—you thought you could escape?

HENRY: Escape?

AMADO: Yes. You thought Mexico could hide you from yourself.

HENRY: No, I—

AMADO: Mexico is very harsh on liars. (17)

As Shepard has continually asserted, escape is a futile, counterproductive effort.

Henry leaves his family and his country for a “new start” (18), but he wants to do so by abandoning his past.

Amado, however, operates as an out-of-body conscience for Henry, constantly reinforcing to Henry the importance of acknowledging the past. “All we can hope for now is to pay for our sins,” Amado tells him (18). Indeed, every aspect of Amado’s character reinforces this contention. As Amado tells Henry, his entire life is focused on rectifying his own misdeeds. After accidentally injuring Consuela’s father, Amado began entering America illegally in order to pay the hospital bill (“there is no work in Mexico,” Amado explains [20]). Amado would work in America until he was arrested and deported: “I would go to jail. They would throw me back into Mexico. I would go to Consuela and the children then swim the river, back to America” (20). When Henry asks Amado why he would go through so much trouble, Amado replies that it was “a way of paying off my debt” (20). Even Amado’s twisted desire to cut out people’s blue eyes represents a form of atonement—he inadvertently shot out one of the older man’s eyes during a Mexican festival. Amado’s entire life, then, becomes an attempt to make restitution for his past sins.

Amado’s contention that Henry must pay for his sins extends beyond Henry as an individual. He identifies Henry’s disconnection and desire to avoid dealing with the past as a national flaw. Scoffing at Henry’s inability to understand the complex nature of Consuela and Amado’s relationship, Amado tells Henry that

In America everything is easy. Sex. Movies. Drugs. It becomes easy to forget yourself. To eat candy. To move farther and farther and farther away from your heart. Until one day, Mr. Henry, you discover you are swimming alone at night in a deep black sea. There is no shore. No light. No sound. You are worse than alone. You are removed from life itself. (24)

Amado’s comments on the detachment and isolation experienced by Americans evoke the same attributes embodied in so many Shepard characters. In Amado’s

mind, Americans have lost contact with the characteristics that supposedly define the country and its people. Amado argues that Henry carries “this dream wherever you go. [...] And this dream is based on a lie” (35). “You actually believe this dream will somehow deliver you to the truth?” he asks. “I am sorry for you, Mr. Henry. I am sorry for your whole country” (35).

To the audience, Amado’s efforts to help Henry see the truth and to force Henry to understand the importance of admitting to past transgressions seem dangerous and menacing. And indeed they are: Amado captures Henry at knifepoint, then imprisons him in Henry’s hotel room, all the while threatening to gouge out Henry’s eyes. But despite all his violent, ominous behavior, Amado becomes the catalyst of change and the source of redemption and rebirth for Henry. Through his threatening actions, Amado forces the moment to its crisis (to paraphrase T. S. Eliot), becoming the motivating factor that allows Henry to explore new territories of identity. Amado even explains his own role in Henry’s awakening, claiming, “I am trying to save you, Mr. Henry” (31). Amado later asserts, “I am here to deliver [the truth] to you. I have been sent to you and you, to me” (36). Amado’s role then, becomes that of soothsayer; he attempts to open up Henry’s eyes to the reality of his (and America’s) character, one that projects a false image and overlooks the transgressions of the past. “You refuse to see the truth,” Amado asserts (35), later screaming at Henry “You are blind now. Now! In *this* world. You do not see!” (45). Amado, however, can “see,” and constantly harasses Henry with visions of images he does not want to deal with (such as the possibility that Henry’s wife has already forgotten him) and questions he does not want to answer (such as what really happened between Henry and his wife).

While Henry exhibits a strong resistance to Amado's entreaties, ultimately he undergoes a distinct shift in his mentality. As the play opens, Henry walks alone contemplating the breakdown of his marriage. At this early stage, Henry explicitly blames his wife, who left Henry and moved to her parents' home state of Michigan, for all the problems in their relationship:

What was I supposed to do? What exactly did you have in mind when you moved up there? What could I do? You knew I couldn't live in that climate. [...] Besides—you'd left already. Years ago. That was clear. You'd—turned your back on me. (8)

Feeling betrayed, Henry escapes America and seems fully prepared to hold his wife accountable for all the marital strife, as well as any problems within his own character. "I'm coming back to myself," he announces during his solitary musings, "After all this time" (9).

It is at this precise moment that Amado makes his shadowy entrance into Henry's world; he shakes up Henry's existence by compelling him to face the details of his life that he has previously suppressed, and in the process begins to make Henry see himself very differently. Through the remainder of the play, Amado will force Henry to reconsider his position on blame and responsibility. As Act I closes, Henry appears to be on the verge of a transformation, as Amado tells Henry, "Maybe you are on the edge of seeing something" (26). Henry's reply, which Shepard indicates should be spoken directly to the audience, represents Henry's burgeoning yet still unformed new understanding of himself:

Maybe—it's possible—I've made a mistake coming down here. Maybe, it's just possible. I mean—the heat of the moment—all that accumulation of misunderstanding. All those—bitter moments—piling up. Maybe—nothing—maybe nothing was seen. (27)

The hesitancy with which Henry delivers these lines demonstrates the emergence of a new awareness of his own culpability, something he was unwilling to acknowledge previously. He does not yet fully comprehend what is happening to him, but by admitting to the possibility that “maybe nothing was seen,” Henry has opened his mind to the chance of discovering a new perspective on identity.

As the action progresses, Henry’s eyes will be opened even wider as he is forced to admit not only his own disillusionment and breakdown, but also his causative role in both processes. Through a series of intrusive and probing questions, Amado provokes Henry into a full confession in which Henry discloses truths about the dissolution of his marriage: his wife only left him when Henry attempted to rob her of her own identity. As he tearfully explains to Amado during an emotional outburst,

I became overwhelmed. Obsessed. She had this quality about her. This—honesty. She actually knew who she was. She belonged to herself. That’s what it was. She was her own person. And I—wanted that—that thing—whatever it was she had. I wanted to possess it. I wanted to take it away from her and make it my own. I wanted to actually rob her of herself. [...] I turned her into my terrible enemy. *I* did that. It was *me*. *I* was the one who did that. (33)

As Henry’s insightful admission indicates, his wife’s stable identity—something Henry and a multitude of other male Shepard characters constantly seek—threatens him. His confessions illustrate his own insecure character, as well as an emerging understanding of his own culpability.

Significantly, it is Henry’s unseen wife who has been able to attain a secure identity, one that begins to move away from the traditional concept of American identity. She moves from Texas (“home of the cowboys”) to Michigan, drastically altering the arid, cowboy-laden Western landscape upon which Shepard has

previously fixated. In Michigan, as Henry explains to Amado, things are very different from the American West: “Very far north. Very cold. Freezing, in fact. They ice fish and run Skidoos all over the place. They think that’s fun up there” (30).

Initially, Henry cannot understand his wife’s motivation for such a move. In one of his imaginary conversations with her, Henry claims he detests “that ridiculous cold. It’s crazy. Inhuman. Humans crave the sun. That’s always been true” (8). But as *Eyes for Consuela* progresses, Henry becomes increasingly willing to abandon his life in Texas to create a new one with his wife in Michigan. Henry informs first Amado and then later Viejo (an old man who owns the hotel and who turns out to be Consuela’s one-eyed father), “I’m going back to Michigan” (46). Ready and willing to try something new, Henry now seeks to leave Mexico with the same zeal that he (and earlier characters such as Kent and Weston) once displayed trying to get there in the first place. His determination to leave Mexico is evident throughout the second act of the play, which opens with Henry packing his suitcase and preparing to get away. “I have to get back,” he insists to Amado (29). Shortly thereafter, Henry implores Consuela to help him find “some means of escape” (44).

Shepard’s audiences have seen this pattern of escape and return before, but Henry’s desire to return to America and his family contains an optimism and a potential that provide a much different tone than in Shepard’s earlier works. His intention to go to Michigan rather than Texas contributes to the atmosphere of new possibility that pervades the second half of *Eyes for Consuela*. Henry’s prospects for success are forecast by Amado, who tells Henry, “When you return to Michigan, you will see the snow with new eyes” (47). Already established in the play as some sort

of mystic, Amado's prediction offers a sense of hope. Although the audience can never truly know whether Henry will succeed in his attempt to recover his sense of identity (the play ends as Henry leaves the hotel), they are provided with a far less ambiguous conclusion than Shepard's other works that address the issue of escape/return, such as *Buried Child*, *A Lie of the Mind*, *La Turista*, and *Fool for Love*

This sense of optimism and potential is enhanced by Henry's behavior with his luggage. When he is initially abducted by Amado, Henry offers his suitcase, which contains "valuable things. They've been in my family a very long time" (14). And later, he "suddenly felt as though I would give anything—absolutely anything to get out of here" (43). When Viejo and Amado take Henry up on his offer, Henry complies:

VIEJO: But you have not paid me your rent. Did you think this was a free vacation?

HENRY: Oh, I'm—I'm sorry. [...] How much did it come to?

VIEJO: I don't want your money. Your money is no good in this place.

HENRY: What then? How can I pay you?

VIEJO: Your things! (*Pointing to suitcase*) [...] I thought you said you had many valuable things.

HENRY: I do. Yes. Yes. Of course.

VIEJO: Family heirlooms. Things you have carried your whole life.

HENRY: Yes.

VIEJO: Things you were willing to trade for your life. Back when you thought you were about to lose it. [...]

HENRY: (*Pause.*) All right—That's fine—I'll go along with that.

VIEJO: Thank you, my friend. Now you may return to Michigan with nothing. (46-47)

Henry's ability to give up the suitcase exhibits his willingness to cast off the self-destructive characteristics of his previous identity (such as the one that drove him to seek escape in Mexico in the first place). By discarding the "family heirlooms" that

have burdened him throughout his life, he is able to formulate a new identity once he returns to Michigan.

This new identity does not entirely rid itself of the past, however. Shepard's plays have consistently pointed out the futility and danger of any such attempts. Rather than avoiding familial connections, Henry is attempting to *return* to family. And he realizes that he cannot conceal past transgressions. Henry's time in this remote Mexican village is his own personal purgatory, an experience which teaches him how people must pay for their sins. So Henry's acceptance of his own misdeeds represents a renewed awareness of the importance of acknowledging the reality of the past. And Henry also attempts to evoke a positive sense of American character while admitting to its flawed construct. As he tells Amado,

We Americans—I mean—our whole—You underestimate the tenacity; the sheer willpower; the toughness that we still possess. I mean—you might be right about certain other qualities; other weaknesses of character, but in that area of doggedness and determination and pure old fashioned grit, well you're up against a pretty tough customer. We don't just roll over and play dead when the chips are down. No siree. [...] We fight! And that's the truth of it. We fight for every inch of what we've established. And we'll continue to fight right down to the wire. (36-37).

Henry's language asserts the American ethic of hard work and tough, pioneering spirit, even while it acknowledges "other weaknesses of character." His willingness to concede these weaknesses while still maintaining a sense of national community, along with his willingness to adopt a new kind of identity, makes Henry an evolved Shepard character. In large part, this is due to Henry's attempt to recall a collective connection, something that unites the individual to a larger community. Henry finally appears to be ready to make a change.

The Death of the Father: *The Late Henry Moss*

While Shepard seems unable at this point in his career to suggest exactly what form any new American identity might take, he more clearly signals a move away from old national narratives. His most recent effort, *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), dramatizes not only the death of the title character, but also the death of an outdated concept of American identity.

The Late Henry Moss was awaited with much anticipation by theatergoers and critics alike. It sold out its five-week run at San Francisco's Magic Theatre, with tickets auctioned off on eBay for \$250 apiece (Lahr 108)—scalped tickets went for as much as \$900 a pair (Roudané 280). The play's popularity may have stemmed from its cast, which included Sean Penn, Nick Nolte, Woody Harrelson, James Gammon, and Cheech Marin, a group that reviewer John Lahr dubs “the Sam Shepard All-Stars” (108). Critical response to the play was less enthusiastic overall (although far more positive than reviews for *Eyes for Consuela*, his previous production): Steven Winn, in his mostly favorable review of *Moss*, notes that it is “slackly written in spots” and “doesn't yet belong in the company of the playwright's celebrated best work” (E1); and Hal Gelb, another Shepard supporter, similarly suggested that “Shepard hasn't returned to his former powers with this play. He simply hasn't given Penn and Nolte sufficient material to work with” (36).

When the play moved to New York the following fall (without the star-studded cast), reviews were even harsher. Edward Karam called the New York production “shopworn,” entitling his review “Been There, Done This” (1). Ben Brantley argued that the while play has “sparks of theatrical magic,” they are “as few and random as

summer's last fireflies" ("No-Good Dad" 1). John Simon, who contended that all Shepard plays since *Fool for Love* (1983) are "very much inferior" to the rest of his work, claims that *The Late Henry Moss* is

unable to find its form or convey its meaning. It rehashes the heavily belabored Shepard topics: ferocious fighting between brothers; problems with a difficult or impossible father (present or absent), life in the desert as opposed to life in the city, sex as a violent physical conflict, unexplained occurrences with contradictory explanations whirling around them. ("Play" 73)

Critics are correct to point out the similarities between *The Late Henry Moss* and previous Shepard plays. In many ways, it seems as if Shepard is merely recycling the same themes with very little distinction between them. *Moss* revolves around two brothers, Earl and Ray, who have reunited at their recently deceased father's (the title character) house to settle his affairs. Ray spends much of the play attempting to piece together the details of his father's final days, which were spent with Conchalla, Henry's mysterious girlfriend, and Taxi, the cabdriver who took Henry and Conchalla on a fishing trip shortly before Henry died. Embittered by his childhood memories of Henry's verbally and physically abusive behavior, Ray seeks the truth, both about the events leading to Henry's death and one particularly traumatic incident in the kitchen years ago which affected the lives of the entire family. As Ray puts it, "Somebody, somewhere along the line has to get to the heart of things" (68). Earl, on the other hand, adopts a wearier, more passive attitude. Instead of seeking answers, he seems resigned to put everything behind him. "Well, you know me, Ray—I was never one to live in the past," he announces in the opening lines of the play. "That never was my deal" (6). But ultimately both brothers will acknowledge the truth about their father's violent personality. As the play continues, Ray recounts the details of the

fateful day in the kitchen when Henry brutally attacked his wife, a scene witnessed by a young Earl and an even younger Ray. In the final scene of the play, Ray, who is still traumatized by the event, forces Earl to relive the moment:

All I could do is watch! And there she was—On the floor! [...] Backed up under the sink! Crushed. He was kicking her, Earl! [...] And every time he kicked her his rage grew a little bit and his face changed! His eyes bulged out and the blood rushed into his neck! And her blood was flying all over the kitchen, Earl! (99-100)

Moss also resembles earlier Shepard plays in that some of the brothers' behavior may suggest that they will continue the destructive father/son cycle that plagues Shepard's male characters. Earl exhibits many similarities to his father throughout the play. He sings the same song that Henry will sing later in the play, prompting Ray to comment, "I thought that was him. I remember him singing that" (7). And Esteban, Henry's neighbor, also draws a comparison between Earl and Henry: "You cry for help—You chase me away. You chase me away—You cry for help. It's the same as your father" (83).

Ray, too, elicits comparisons to Henry at times. Inspecting Henry's refrigerator and finding only a jar of jalapeños, he sits down to eat them. Meanwhile, Earl is speculating on the cause of Henry's death: "Can't stay alive on peppers and hooch. [*Ray opens jar, sits at table and starts eating the peppers, chasing them down with bourbon*]" (27). Ray also shows signs of repeating the same destructive pattern as his father by expressing interest in staying in Henry's house:

RAY: I'm gonna stay awhile. [...]

EARL: You're gonna stay?

RAY: Yep.

EARL: You mean here? You're gonna stay here in this house? Henry's house?

RAY: Yep. I like it here.

EARL: Oh, so now you like it here. It's warm and cozy.
 RAY: I dunno. I feel—some kind of connection here.
 EARL: Connection?
 RAY: Yep.
 EARL: I suppose you felt some kind of “connection” to the tools and the photo album too, huh? [...]
 RAY: Oh—Yeah, well—I gave those away. (88-89)

Although Ray's stated desire to live in Henry's adobe suggests that Ray will continue the family lineage, thus repeating the cycle, his next lines sever him from his father's legacy. Besides the house,³⁷ Henry's meager inheritance for his sons consists of a bed upon which Henry's corpse is laid, a table and chairs, a toolbox and tools (“pretty cheap,” as Ray says. “Taiwan steel. Swap meet stuff” [12]), and perhaps most significantly a photo album.

Photos appear prominently in some of Sam Shepard's earlier plays. In *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), Lorraine burns old photos of herself because she feels no strong connection to that part of her past.³⁸ And the significance of the photos in *Simpatico* was discussed earlier in this chapter. In *The Late Henry Moss*, the photo album represents familial connection, a link to past generations. Earl explicitly explains the album's significance, telling Ray, “There were photographs in there going back to the turn of the century! [...] Those photographs are irreplaceable” (91).

³⁷ While property and land are usually perceived by Shepard's characters as valuable both financially and spiritually (recall Eddie's desire to establish himself and May on “a piece of ground up in Wyoming” in *Fool for Love* [24], or Weston finally realizing that his house and ranch are “full of potential,” as many characters describe it in *Curse of the Starving Class* [177]), Henry Moss' house is *not* full of potential. In fact, Shepard specifically indicates in the stage directions to *Moss* that the house should resemble a prison, with a single “cotlike bed” placed in an alcove with “a small barred window directly above it, like a jail cell” (5).

³⁸ Examining one of the photos more closely, Lorraine says, “This was down in Victorville. Had a big “Frontier Days” blowout there. Big to-do” (109). When her daughter asks if Lorraine is sure she wants to burn the picture, she replies, “What do I wanna save it for? It's all in the past. Dead and gone. Just a picture” (109).

But Ray simply relinquishes these “irreplaceable” items to Taxi, discarding the remnants of his father’s inheritance. He has no interest in ascending to the throne. Nor does Earl. Despite his claims about the sentimental value of Henry’s possessions, he has no more interest in continuing the family heritage than Ray. As Earl tells Ray in the opening scene, “I mean nothing he’s got is worth diddly. Not like we’re inheriting a legacy here” (13). Unlike Vince in *Buried Child* and Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class*, these sons express no strong desire to carry on their father’s lineage. Matthew Roudané disagrees, arguing that Earl and Ray have no choice but to repeat the cycle of failure and self-destructiveness: “Henry, Earl, and Ray can only ponder the inevitability of their biological and spiritual destiny. [...] The threat to future generations, Shepard implies, is a given” (290). But neither brother ultimately seems to accept the mantle of the new Moss patriarch. And even if one was to supplant Henry and carry on the cycle, neither brother has children of his own, which further suggests that the family line is coming to an end. The resulting lack of an heir suggests that Shepard’s characters may finally be able to envision new formulations of identity instead of repeating the same self-destructive cycles.

Notwithstanding each brothers’ desire to cast off their father’s legacy, to some degree critics raise a valid point when they argue that *Moss* returns to some familiar Shepard territory, and contains strong echoes of past plays. With his violent and unstable temperament, Henry Moss resembles earlier fathers from Shepard’s plays such as Dodge (in *Buried Child*), Weston in (*Curse of the Starving Class*) and Baylor (in *A Lie of the Mind*). The physical sparring in which brothers Ray and Earl engage likely reminds audiences of Lee and Austin’s fraternal infighting in *True West* (also,

both plays are set in their parent's kitchen). Ray's earnest search for the truth about certain details in the family history is reminiscent of Tilden's efforts to force his family to acknowledge the truth about the incestuous birth of the baby in *Buried Child*. And the theme of escape, an action that both Earl and Henry Moss separately admit to, is a Shepard staple.

Despite the common criticism that Shepard merely repeats himself in his recent plays, however, he continues to address the same themes but in a progressively evolving manner. Shepard's latest play suggests a development in his ongoing interest in individual and national identity. Several elements of *The Late Henry Moss* seem to support this contention. Significantly, Shepard brings his characters back to America; the setting "is no longer a desert wasteland but the Southwest, the Latin/Native American West" (Gelb 37), specifically an adobe in New Mexico. Eschewing the barren West that set the stage for so many of his plays, Shepard instead selects a region where the people are connected to the land through ritual and heritage.

Another important distinction between *Moss* and earlier Shepard plays is the distinct absence of certain familiar Shepard themes and images. Notably, there are no cowboys, and no farmers. Nor is there anyone who aspires to achieve these roles. Earl runs a packaging business ("We make boxes," he explains to Ray [25]) and Ray "makes ends meet by playing the clarinet at a Ramada Inn" (Roudané, "Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss*" 283). There is no one seeking the frontier, no one hoping to connect to the land or use it to make his fortune.

Even more significant is the occasion for the setting: Earl and Ray are in New Mexico to bury their father, Henry, a man that neither son had seen for years. Henry is cantankerous, moody, violent and profoundly disconnected from everything around him. Henry's dislocation is apparent in the way his sons describe him: Ray complains, "it's stupid that he died like this! Out here in the middle of nowhere with no—contact. No contact whatsoever!" To this, Earl responds, "That's the way he *lived*! He lived with no contact. Why shouldn't he die the same way?" (23).

Henry's sense of dislocation, along with his temper, his alcoholism and his inability to maintain any semblance of a family life, places him in a long line of Shepard fathers, a connection that did not escape critics. In his review of *Moss*, Ben Brantley commented, "The title character here is dear old destructive Dad, a seedy, hard-drinking figure who has shown up in many of Mr. Shepard's plays, both in the unwashed flesh ('Buried Child,' 'Fool for Love') and as the son-warping center of memorably spun anecdotes ('True West')" ("No-Good Dad" E1). Steven Winn makes a similar comparison, noting that "the play revisits the American family wreckage Shepard has been excavating for decades" (Winn E1). And Allen Kuharski points out that Henry represents something far greater than merely an individual father's failure, commenting, "Shepard has captured a certain American monstrosity in Henry" (501).

Admittedly, Henry displays no overt characteristics of the pioneer, cowboy or farmer that Shepard has consistently associated with American identity. Nor does he actively seek to attain such an identity. But perhaps this can be explained by Henry's condition—he is already dead as the play begins. Henry's posthumous status

suggests that his ability to represent any form of American identity is past. He bears no resemblance to that national identity because he, like it, is nothing more than a ghost, a faded memory that seems strangely out of place. Earl makes this point more explicitly as he thumbs through some old photographs of Henry as a twelve-year-old boy on a farm: “Look at that. There he is. No idea what’s in store for him. Just a kid standing in a wheat field” (29). This is the only reference to Henry’s connection to the land, and even this one image seems incongruous to Earl. Dead or alive, Henry is completely unable to effectively represent American identity.

While fathers have died in Shepard’s plays before (most notably Dodge in *Buried Child*), someone else has always risen to take his place. But in *Henry Moss*, Earl and Ray are not clashing over which brother will be heir to the throne; neither seems particularly interested in that role. Henry has two sons but no successor. In fact, during much of the production the brothers ignore their father’s corpse, which is lying on a bed in the same room, prompting Ray to comment early in the play, “He’s starting to stink, Earl. I think he’s starting to stink” (*Moss* 18). Yet neither brother makes any effort to remove the body until the second act. It remains neglected in the corner of the room, rotting. And when Ray finally summons two funeral attendants, they create such a slapstick atmosphere surrounding the removal of the body that Henry’s death becomes comical rather than tragic.³⁹

Henry himself spends much of the play attempting to prove that he is *not* dead. Although his corpse is onstage at the beginning of the play, Henry comes alive in a series of flashbacks that recount the days leading up to his demise. But long before

his physical death, Henry is pronounced dead by his girlfriend Conchalla when they meet each other in prison (both of them were jailed for drunk and disorderly behavior); as Henry tells Taxi: “We were both incarcerated together and she made that pronouncement. Publicly! Standing right over my semiconscious body. She just bellowed it out to the general jail community at large: ‘Señor Moss is dead!’ Now it’s all over town. Everyone thinks I’m dead!” (61). When Taxi tries to comfort Henry by pointing out that Henry’s ability to walk and talk proves he is alive, Henry retorts,

Walking around and talking? What the hell difference does that make?
There’s a whole shitload of “walkers” and “talkers”—fabricating and
perambulating their butts off! You think they’re all in the land of the living?
Is that what you think? (62)

Despite the obvious signs of Henry’s physical vivacity, spiritually he is already dead. He implores Taxi to examine his eyes closely, to see if “there might be a little spark inside there” (64). Henry seeks confirmation of his own vitality:

HENRY: Do I look like a dead man or what?

TAXI: No, sir.

HENRY: Not the least bit, huh? Not around the eyes a little? Look around the eyes. That’s what gives it away. Look closely here. Come over and give it a good hard look-see. [*Taxi reluctantly approaches Henry and stops in front of him, staring hard at Henry’s eyes.*]

HENRY: No, you’ve got to get in here close! Scrutinize this. Penetrate past the outer covering. [*Taxi moves in closer and bends in toward Henry’s face, staring hard at his eyes. Henry opens his eyes wide, using his fingers and thumbs to pry them open.*]

HENRY: Now—Look right deep into the pupil, where it’s dark. Where it drops off into nowhere. You see that? Right straight in there like you were riding a train into a black tunnel. What do you see? Tell me what you see. [*Pause. Taxi stares hard into Henry’s eyes.*]

TAXI: Nothing. [*Henry drops his hands from his eyes.*]

HENRY: Exactly! Exactly my point. Absolutely nothing!

³⁹ Shepard’s stage directions note that the attendants “are struggling to place Henry’s corpse inside a black canvas body bag” (47), and then moments later they drop Henry’s body onto the floor as they labor to carry it (50).

TAXI: No, I mean, they look okay to me.
HENRY: They look dead! (63)

In this scene, Shepard continues to emphasize eyes and perception, as he did in *Eyes for Consuela*. But whereas *Eyes* focused on the renewal of vision and the potential to discover new formulations of identity, *Moss* deals with the recognition of an identity that is already dead. In contrast to the wandering American from *Eyes* who will “see the snow with new eyes” (47), Henry Moss’ eyes “look dead,” devoid of vitality. The implication here seems to be that the identity that Moss represents is still “walking around and talking” but is no longer a viable entity. In the closing moments of *Moss*, Henry finally recognizes his own posthumous status; furthermore, he accepts culpability for his own fate by connecting his violent behavior to his spiritual death. Moments before Conchalla covers his face with a blanket (in the bed where Henry’s corpse lies in the first act), Henry recounts his vicious attack on his wife:

I remember—The day I died—She was on the floor. [...] I remember the floor—was yellow—I can see the floor—and—her blood—her blood was smeared across it. I thought I’d killed her—but it was me. It was me I killed. [...] I can see her eyes—peering up at me. Her swollen eyes. She just—stays there, under the sink. Silent. Balled up like an animal. Nothing moving but her eyes. She sees me. She knows. I can tell she knows. She sees me dying! Right there in front of her. She watches me pass away! (111-112)

While Henry’s body will continue to perambulate for years, this was the moment his life truly ended. The dialogue here is particularly egocentric as he attempts to affirm his (white male) perspective. As Heather Nathans points out, Henry “is totally unable to imagine any other experience than his own” (Nathans). His language emphasizes his own perspective, only mentioning his wife—the woman who is being brutally beaten—in relation to himself.

But this is also the moment that kills Henry, and presumably his experience as well. As Matthew Roudané succinctly observes, “Henry fathoms only seconds before lapsing into his final death that, at the precise moment he assaulted his wife, he transformed himself from the *present* Henry Moss to the *late* Henry Moss. Within the imaginative logic of Shepard’s play, physical death twenty-five years later is a mere formality” (“Shepard’s *The Late Henry Moss*” 282). Such a characterization—a man who does not realize he’s already dead—highlights Henry’s incapacity to represent a larger sense of national identity. If Henry’s character is reminiscent of earlier father figures who represented failed attempts at achieving an American character, then a major difference between Henry and his predecessors is that he is dead at the very outset of the play; he is a walking corpse, a phantom, a remnant of an image that no longer exists. Henry’s ghost-like condition reflects the notion that America has been clinging to a dead image of national identity.

“New Territory”: Shepard’s Exploration

With the seeming finality of the father’s death, it remains to be seen whether Shepard will be able to articulate a new form of American identity. He has speculated that his next project will be a departure from some of his previous plays; in a recent interview, he mentioned that he has been “working on a new play that has two female characters in it, mainly because I just came out of one that was almost all male. So I just wanted to shift a little bit” (Roudané, “Interview” 73).

The “shift” that Shepard discusses has actually been emerging throughout the last decade of his career. Some critics have noticed his movement in new directions. Hal

Gelb commented in 2000 that “Shepard seems to be trying to move into new territory” (36). And Lisa Wade argues that 1998’s *Eyes for Consuela*

demonstrates the male’s movement toward the female’s space; Henry will exit his jungle seclusion and meet with his wife in the north. The play leaves the audience with pregnant expectation, of emotional fruition never before imagined in a Shepard play. (Wade, “Shepard’s Plays” 273)

In his recent works, Shepard has been expanding his dramatic horizons to include a greater cultural diversity of characters, to create more compelling female characters, and to explore the possibility of a new “essence of myth” that can reconnect the individual to the nation.

Shepard argues that the void left by the death of national identity must be filled. As yet, Shepard has been unable to provide a suitable replacement for the images of the farmer, pioneer and cowboy that he has exposed as false—yet still compelling—representations of America; but throughout his career, he has suggested that the nation *needs* an “essence of myth” to link individuals to each other and to a communal past. Although Shepard has offered no specific vision of a reformed American identity, his works have provided clues to locating alternative sources of a national narrative.

The “Essence of Myth”

This notion of a collective connection, something that provides a communal link to others, reappears in numerous Shepard works. This connection, Shepard suggests, can come from a unifying “essence of myth.” Shepard often invokes a strong undercurrent of mythic elements, which become a source of possible redemption and renewal. In a 1984 interview in which he was asked if his work revolves around

myths, Shepard replied that “It means of lot of things to me. [...] The thing that’s powerful about a myth is that it’s the communication of emotions, at the same time ancient and for all time” (Lippman 9). Eight years later, Shepard would elaborate on his meaning:

The traditional meaning of myth, the ancient meaning of myth, is that it served a purpose in our life. The purpose had to do with being able to trace ourselves back through time and follow our emotional self. Myth served as a story in which people could connect themselves to the present and the future. Because they were hooked up with the lineage of myth. It was so powerful and so strong that it acted as a thread in culture. And that’s been destroyed. Myth in its truest sense has been demolished. It doesn’t exist anymore. All we have is fantasies about it. Or ideas that don’t speak to our inner self at all, they just speak to some lame notions about the past. But they don’t connect with anything. We’ve lost touch with the essence of myth. (Rosen, “Silent” 35)

Shepard argues that contemporary society’s loss of this “essence of myth” creates the dissociation and disillusionment that foster the self-destructive, futile escapist impulse. Americans, he asserts, often fail to connect to a shared historical experience. Shepard recounts his own experience during a 4th of July celebration in Milwaukee. Discussing the fireworks display, he explains that

one of the weird things about being in America now [...] is that you don’t have any connection with the past, with what history means; so you can be there celebrating the Fourth of July, but all you know is that things are exploding in the sky. And then you’ve got this emotional thing that goes a long way back, which creates a certain kind of chaos, a kind of terror, you don’t know what the fuck’s going on. It’s really hard to grab the whole out of the experience. (Chubb et al. 196)

And it is this wholeness, this “essence of myth,” that he argues Americans must possess if they are ever to achieve a coherent, stable communal identity that links the individual to the nation.

Throughout Shepard's career, his works have sometimes hinted and sometimes explicitly stated that reconnecting to an "essence of myth" will create a corresponding reclamation of identity. Shepard's vision of this new essence remains a bit hazy: his discussions on myth evoke legends ranging from the Egyptian myth of Osiris to *Romeo and Juliet* (Shepard references both in the same interview with Amy Lippman). But one point of emphasis remains constant—Shepard's insistence on the importance of myth as a connection to the past, not just our own individual families but to everyone around us. Myth, he explains, "not only connects you and me to our personal families, it connects us to the family of generations and generations of races of peoples, tribes, the mythology of ancient people" (Rosen, "Silent" 36). This is the "essence of myth" that Americans must locate in order to recover any stable sense of a unified identity.

While not necessarily restricting himself in his presentation of this "essence of myth," Shepard most often evokes Native American ritual and legend as the source of a stronger tie to the past and other people. And he specifically identifies Native American culture as containing the "essence of myth" that the rest of America lacks; he explains that

All these myths about a yearning to reconnect to some higher ritual where there was some "meaning" never really existed in American culture, except in the American Indian culture, which definitely had something akin to that. But the European culture didn't. Manifest Destiny? Manifest Destiny didn't come close [...]. (Roudané, "Interview" 76)

In an earlier interview, he argued that Native American culture contains rituals that unite individuals through more than just heredity:

The same with the American Indians—they were connected to their ancestors, people they never knew but are connected to through myth, through prayer,

through ritual, through dance, music, all of those forms that lead people into a river of myth. And there was a connecting river, not a fragmented river. (Rosen, “Silent” 36)

The sentiment behind Shepard’s description of the interconnection created by this type of myth reappears in the speeches of characters like the one Vince (*Buried Child*) delivers about his newfound connection to generations spanning “clear on back to faces I’d never seen before but still recognized” (*Buried* 130). But Vince only discovers a familial heritage, whereas Shepard’s conception of Native American myth extends to a much broader community of Americans and to the land itself.

Shepard’s comments on Native American culture contain the same notion of connection—to a common heritage and to the land itself—that some Indian tribes espouse. A prominent example comes from Chief Sealth of the Suquamish, in a letter to President Franklin Pierce in 1854. Responding to the government’s request to buy the tribe’s land in what is now Washington, Chief Sealth wrote,

The great chief sends word that he wishes to buy our land. [...] If we sell you the land, you must remember that it is sacred and you must teach your children that it is sacred. [...] This we know. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. (qtd. in Kreyche 100)

The interconnection that Chief Sealth describes sounds very similar to Shepard’s comment to interviewer Amy Lippman when he discusses his preference for the American West over the East: “you really feel this ancient thing about the land. Ancient. That it’s primordial. [...] It has to do with the relationship between the land and the people—between the human being and the ground” (10). Like Chief Sealth, Shepard argues for a spiritual connection—to the land, the community, and the past—that can restore the “essence of myth” that America has lost.

Shepard's beliefs on this "essence of myth" emerge in much of his work. His poetry and prose collection *Hawk Moon* prominently incorporates a mythic spirituality. It opens with "Hawk Moon Month," a short stream-of-consciousness piece that celebrates November, Shepard's birth month and an important month in Hopi Indian culture. The piece is infused with ritual, referring to "old ancient sacred land of Hopi month Antelope deer and antler clan," and its language evokes sacred ceremonial images: "dance snake in mouth dance spirit dance snake mouth" (11). Hopi Indian ritual seems to generate a great deal of interest for Shepard, who featured it prominently early in his career.

Operation Sidewinder (1970), one of Shepard's first forays into larger-scale productions (the play premiered at Lincoln Center instead of an Off-Off Broadway venue), provides an overt statement of the redemptive power of Native American myth. Dedicated in part to Crazy Horse, the Hopi, and Old Oraibi—one of the original Hopi settlements (Mottram 76)—this elaborate play centers on a giant mechanical snake, which emanates light, rattles, and even sways and glides in a sidewinder motion. The mechanical snake, as Young Man explains, is also a computer, the result of a secret government experiment: "The Air Force cooked it up to trace flying saucers" (248). The plot is further complicated by two groups of incompetent revolutionaries who hatch a plan to taint the Army's drinking water with dope, and by a tribe of Indians led by Mickey Free (a half-Indian) that initially assists the rebels but later abandons its role in the events. The action culminates with government forces storming the Indian camp, where Mickey Free, who has obtained the snake, is leading a sacred ceremony. In this climactic final scene, the Native

American rituals nullify the soldiers' power, and the tribe suddenly disappears from the stage in a burst of light and sound, with the suggestion that its members have achieved a higher state of enlightenment.

Described as “schizophrenic” and “cryptic,” *Operation Sidewinder* puzzled critics and confused theatergoers:

On almost all accounts this production of *Operation Sidewinder* was regarded as a catastrophe. The critic Harold Clurman termed the play “dull” and its satire “banal.” Brendan Gill underscored the “tedium of the evening” and concluded that “once Mr. Shepard has exploited his POW!s and ZAP!s he is left with little but magical incantations to offer us, and they are not enough.” Audiences began laughing during the Hopi ritual, and of the fifty postperformance questionnaires that were returned, only two were positive. Subscribers to the American play series canceled “in droves.” (Wade, *Shepard* 43)

Stephen Bottoms similarly points out the flawed ending, observing that “*Sidewinder*’s Hopi ceremony may be intended as an image of humanity rediscovering its ‘authentic possibilities,’ but it is itself fundamentally inauthentic, a simulation stripped of context” (Bottoms 89). He goes on to criticize the ending as an example of “deus ex machina conclusions” which “simply sidestep the cultural crises established elsewhere” (89). Shepard himself considered the Lincoln Center production “a total disaster” (78).

Despite the overwhelmingly negative reaction to the play, *Operation Sidewinder* remains an important work in Sam Shepard’s career, as it offers a glimpse into his belief in the power of a redemptive, unifying myth. While Shepard’s reconstruction of the Hopi ritual may have some authenticity issues, his belief in the “essence of myth” to reconnect people to the land and each other is genuine. *Operation*

Sidewinder contains a strong, spiritual thread that ultimately provides salvation for some of the central characters.

The seriousness with which he treats Native American rituals elevates them above any individual or group in the play. Every other character or group is parodied, including all the “revolutionaries.” The Young Man, a hippie heroin addict, fails to accomplish any of his goals. Billy, the Young Man’s accomplice, is depicted as an old grizzled prospector, complete “*with long gray beard, floppy hat, yellow shirt, red bandanna, overalls with suspenders, long boots, pots and pans attached to his waist so they clang when he walks*” (205), who confounds the military men who interrogate him by spinning yarns. And the Black Panthers who conspire with the Young Man to taint the military’s drinking water have their philosophies appropriated by a girl on roller skates who serves them food at the drive-in restaurant, telling them “you people have such a groovy thing going” (218). The military fares no better in their portrayal. The absurdity of a UFO-tracking mechanical snake, combined with inept officers and a scientist who (as numerous critics have observed) is a blatant caricature of *Dr. Strangelove*’s title character (Mottram, Bottoms, Wade), creates an impression of military and governmental incompetence.

But Shepard spares Native American rituals from such satire. His detailed stage directions outlining the ceremony that takes place at the end of the play indicate the importance of the Indian rites. The final scene opens to a blackened stage, upon which members of Mickey Free’s tribe sing authentic Hopi chants (Shepard even includes the musical bars which accompany the words). The chants, and the 4-5 full pages of stage directions that provide a precise explanation of how to perform the

ceremony, are “an intricate re-creation of the Hopi’s Snake-Antelope ritual (the highlight of their ceremonial year), complete with transcribed trance-chants” (Bottoms 88). Shepard intended for productions of *Sidewinder* to adhere to the authenticity of the ceremony; as his stage directions indicate, “*Everything about the dance is spiritual and sincere and should not be cartooned or choreographed beyond the unison of the rhythmic patterns*” (*Sidewinder*251). In a play that seemingly satirizes both the establishment and countercultures, the Native American myths are treated with sincerity and reverence.

The power and success of those myths also underscore their redemptive significance. As the ceremony progresses, it is raided by a group of desert tactical troops who attempt to disrupt the proceedings. But they are unable to halt the events, and Mickey Free, along with his tribe, Honey (a woman who Mickey Free saved from the snake earlier), and the Young Man, circle the soldiers as they continue to chant:

The DESERT TACTICAL TROOPS open fire on the Indians with their machine guns. The INDIANS keep coming. They form a circle with MICKEY at the head of it and the DESERT TACTICAL TROOPS in the center firing again and again. The INDIANS just sway back and forth to the rhythm of the chant. The sidewinder lights up, the sky lights up. The 3RD DESERT TACTICAL TROOP rushes straight toward MICKEY FREE, firing his machine gun into him. MICKEY just chants and sways. (253)

The power of the tribe’s mythic ritual renders the troops’ guns ineffective. The ceremony culminates in an elaborate stage spectacle in which Mickey and his tribe, including Honey and the Young Man, disappear from the stage, leaving the troops “*holding their ears and shielding their eyes*” (254). It is unclear exactly what happens to the tribe, but in this moment of “controlled anarchy,” a term Shepard

would later use to describe the choreographed mayhem of *True West* (Rosen, “Territory” 4), Mickey Free’s group has clearly triumphed over the establishment.

Shepard provides no assurance about the fate of Mickey Free’s tribe. It is clearly saved from the soldiers, but what happens to it next is a complete mystery. In this respect, *Operation Sidewinder* concludes with the same ambivalence and uncertainty as plays such as *La Turista*, *A Lie of the Mind*, and *True West*. Shepard has always expressed discontent with tidy resolutions; he notes, “Endings are so hard. Because the temptation always is a sense that you’re supposed to wrap it up somehow. You’re supposed to culminate it in something fruitful. And it always feels so phony, when you try to wrap it all up” (Rosen, “Territory” 6). Shepard’s conclusion of *Operation Sidewinder* offers his audiences a tantalizing glimpse of the redemptive power of connecting to a deeper sense of myth and heritage, without providing any real clues about how to achieve it.

Perhaps Shepard cannot provide those clues because he is not entirely sure of the answer himself. While he speaks meaningfully about the importance of connecting to an “essence of myth,” Shepard cannot predict the shape of this new American identity; he can only expose the flaws of what he perceives as the current national character and the dangers that accompany any attempt to achieve it.

Nevertheless, *Operation Sidewinder* offers some general ideas on an “essence of myth.” The invocation of Native American myth, Shepard’s favorite spiritual source, seems to appeal to Shepard because of its reliance on natural elements. The Hopi rituals that Shepard incorporates into the play draw heavily from nature and the land, as is evident from the Snake-Antelope ritual that Shepard reproduces in the play.

Similarly, the appearance of the Spider Lady character, a shaman whose name is “the Hopi equivalent of Mother Nature” (Bottoms 89), reinforces the strong connection to the land. Such rituals tap into a more ancient bond with the land, and evoke a spirit of ancestral heritage that modern Americans lack.

Taken alone, *Operation Sidewinder*’s comments on myth offer no conclusions, but placed within the larger context of Shepard’s dramaturgy, a more consistent appeal to an “essence of myth” emerges. The same images appear in numerous Shepard works besides *Sidewinder Angel City* (1976), Shepard’s cynical dissection of Hollywood’s mass-marketing machine, examines a society that is on the brink of ruin because it has lost its “essence of myth.” In the play, Rabbit, “a kind of artist-shaman, arrives in a nightmare version of a Hollywood production office, which is replete with all the clichéd ingredients (dictatorial producers, would-be-starlet secretary, hack script needing rewrites)” (Bottoms 133). Ostensibly, Rabbit has been hired to salvage a film production. Much like a gunslinger for hire, he is brought to Culver City to save the day—he even arrives by a buckboard drawn by “a team a’ horses” (*Angel* 65). Lanx and Wheeler, the two producers of the film, “got in over our heads in this one particular project and uh—we’re looking for an ace in the hole” (66). Lanx informs Rabbit that “what’s missing at the heart of the material is a meaningful character,” one that can “somehow transcend the very idea of ‘character’ as we know it today” (67). The project needs Rabbit’s creative talent to rescue it:

LANX: You’re not just another ordinary hack. You’re supposed to be an artist, right?

RABBIT: Right.

LANX: A kind of magician or something.

RABBIT: Something like that.

LANX: You dream things up.

RABBIT: Right. (67)

Rabbit's magic uses spirituality as its root force. He "arrives at the studio dragging magic bundles behind him, signifying that he is not just a script doctor but an artist with shamanistic powers" (Wade, *Shepard* 80). Rabbit seems able to perform the "slight miracle" Lanx requests (*Angel* 66).

But as Rabbit learns more about his job, he begins to think the "state of emergency" that Lanx keeps referring to applies to Culver City instead of the film (67). Lanx and Wheeler claim that they are looking for a good disaster picture to release to the public, but they seem to imply that an actual disaster is imminent:

LANX: We have an idea that this town is ripe for another disaster.

RABBIT: (*pause*) Disaster?

WHEELER: Cinematically speaking. (*nervous laugh*) [...] You see, all of the really major box-office smashes have dealt with disaster to one degree or another. Either a disaster is about to happen, it's already happened, or it's actually taking place right now.

RABBIT: Right now?

WHEELER: In the movie. Right now in the movie. [...] We have come to believe that it's only through a major disaster being interjected into this picture that we'll be able to save ourselves from total annihilation.

RABBIT: You mean financial?

WHEELER: (*suddenly serious*) And otherwise. (70)

Lanx and Wheeler's allusions to a very real (non-filmic) danger become literalized when Wheeler exposes his lizard scale-covered arm to Rabbit, lamenting, "The city is eating us alive. Can't you see my skin? [...] It's turning us into snakes or lizards or something. Can't you feel that? We need protection" (71).

The protection Rabbit offers attempts to draw on Native American myths. Arguing that "this situation seems to call for a more traditional approach," Rabbit lays out the bundles in the form of a "Medicine Wheel," a ritual he attributes to American Indians (92). He explains its function to Wheeler, saying

Now, if you'll notice, there's four main bundles in the wheel. One for each point on the compass. To the North is wisdom, and its medicine animal is the buffalo. The color of the North is white. [...] The South is the sign of the mouse, and its medicine color is green. The south is the place of innocence and trust.

WHEELER: Amazing! The Indians dreamed this up?

RABBIT: In the West is the sign of the bear. The West is the "Looks-Within" place, and its color is black—

WHEELER: Hold it! What's that mean? "Looks-Within" place? What does that mean?

RABBIT: Uh—I guess it means the place for looking inside yourself? It's a very dangerous medicine bundle. In fact it's the only authentic bundle I've got. The rest are imitations. (97)

Rabbit's description of the Medicine Wheel, which contains mostly "imitations" of the real thing, reveals some problematic aspects of Shepard's evocation of Native American myth. While he consistently asserts that Native American myth contains an authentic and powerful connection to the land and to past generations, his own appropriation of that myth (as a white man) raises some questions. Is Shepard presenting a genuine image of Native American myth? Or can he only offer a warped reflection of that image, one that is clouded by Shepard's own preconceptions and cultural biases?

These questions have been addressed by some critics, who express doubts about the authenticity of the myth that Shepard incorporates into his drama. Shepard's incorporation of Hopi ritual in *Operation Sidewinder*, as discussed above, elicited reviews that questioned the veracity of his presentation which some felt was "fundamentally inauthentic" (Bottoms 89).

The question of authenticity extends well beyond theater critics' assessment of Shepard's representation of Native American culture. Anthropologists have debated extensively about the ability of an outsider to represent accurately a culture to which

he or she does not belong. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz effectively argues, “The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong. There are enormous difficulties to such an enterprise” (124). Anthropologist Victor Turner has more specifically linked Geertz’ question about the validity of an outsider’s perspective on culture to theater and performance. Can a staged performance of a cultural event ever provide a truthful account? Turner and his wife, Edith, came to this conclusion:

Our recommendation, then, is this: If we attempt to perform ethnography, let us not begin with such apparently “exotic” and “bizarre” cultural phenomena as rituals and myths. Such an emphasis may only encourage prejudice, since it stresses the “otherness of the other.” (qtd. in Schechner 31)

Such comments seem directly applicable to Shepard’s examination of Native American rituals. Shepard may be sincere in his belief in the potential for myth to provide a collective identity that ties people to the land and the past, but his presentation of that myth must be understood to be refracted by his own cultural (mis)perceptions. Shepard’s representation of American Indian rituals arguably emphasizes the “otherness of the other” by creating stereotypical rather than authentic images—an argument supported by the fact that the original production of *Operation Sidewinder* was cast with white actors in redface (Bottoms 89).

But Shepard indicates that he is aware of the complications that arise when he uses Native American myth. He acknowledges Rabbit’s (and his own) position as an outsider; when Wheeler asks him how the Wheel works, Rabbit admits he doesn’t know: “This is an ancient design. How am I supposed to know. I’m a white man. It took thousands of years to cook this up. I’m just explaining the structure” (98).

Rabbit's admission calls into question his ability to provide a genuine representation of the myths he employs. And even the inauthentic feel of the Hopi ritual in *Sidewinder* seems intentional rather than accidental. Shepard's decision to place a giant mechanical snake at the center of the Hopi ceremony suggests a self-reflexive acknowledgement of artificiality.

But while Shepard's reproduction of Native American myth may not be wholly accurate, it reveals his strong conviction in the authenticity of the "essence of myth" itself. Shepard's true interest is in the power of a communal myth to connect individuals to the land and to a sense of ancestry. While he offers Native American myth as a strong example of the "essence of myth" to which Americans must connect, Shepard is not necessarily arguing that the nation must adopt American Indian rituals as its national character. Rather, Shepard points to the unifying power of Indian myth as a model from which America could benefit because such myth "acted as a thread in culture" (Rosen, "Silent" 35), something America desperately needs. As he explains, "From what I understand of it, and I've gotten this from some of the Indians I've gotten to know, there was a real relationship between the forces of nature and the human condition" (Roudané, "Interview" 76). To Shepard, Native American narratives seem appropriate because they are already deeply rooted in American soil, drawing their vitality from the land and their ancestors who lived on it.

Exploration of a More Inclusive and Accessible Identity

Shepard's exploration of new territories of identity extends beyond the search for a new "essence of myth"; the expanded role of female characters in his plays suggests

that he seeks to widen his dramatic scope beyond the white male perspective. His treatment of female characters throughout his career has received a great deal of attention from critics who mostly accuse him of being unable to create strong female characters, especially early in his career. In 1981, Bonnie Marranca argued that

Shepard has no apparent interest in the relations of men and women, preferring instead to write about male experience. He writes as if he is unaware of what has been happening between men and women in the last decade. [...] [I]n fact, his female characters are much less independent and intelligent [than] many of those created by [his literary forefathers] a hundred years ago.

It cannot be ignored that Shepard, who is in some ways an idol of his young audiences, is not simply traditional in his view of women, but downright oppressive. (30)

Similarly, Florence Falk evaluates Shepard's early work as inherently male-oriented; she asserts that "men are the energy centers of most Shepard plays, while women take peripheral roles (as, for examples, the Las Vegas show girls in *Seduced*, or girl groupies in *Melodrama Play* and *The Tooth of Crime*)" (95-96). Citing such characters as Lupe and Liza in *Action* (1974), who cook and clean for the two male characters, and Becky Lou, Hoss' groupie in *Tooth of Crime* (1969), Falk observes, "With few exceptions, women are the domestic caretakers of the plays, their responsibilities ranging from cooking to fucking on command" (96).

By his own admission, Shepard recognizes the limited role of his female characters early in his career. He claims that his early plays

felt so sort of overwhelmed by the confusion about masculinity, about the confusion about how these men identified themselves. There wasn't even any room to consider the female, because the men were so fucked up. You spent the whole play trying to figure out what these men were about, who had no idea themselves. (Rosen, "Territory" 7)

As Shepard continued to write plays, however, he consciously attempted to create female characters with more depth. In an interview from 2000 in which he was asked about the “evolution of [his] female characters,” Shepard discussed his efforts to “shift” to a more rounded female characterization:

They have become more substantive characters rather than being emblems. I think in my earlier plays they were more emblematic, like Miss Scoons in *Angel City*, and stuff like that. I think that the shift in the development of my female characters began with *Curse of the Starving Class*, you know, with the mother and the daughter. (Roudané, “Interview” 73)

But even as Shepard identifies a “shift in the development of my female characters,” they still appear fairly static. While both Ella and Emma in *Curse* do exhibit a headstrong and defiant attitude, each remains problematic as independent characters. Ella is willing to stand up to her husband by attempting to sell the house and fending off his threats (“He can’t hurt me now!” she tells Wesley. “I’ve got protection! If he lays a hand on me, I’ll have him cut to ribbons!” [*Curse* 173]). But she only finds that protection in another man, Taylor, who later dupes her like he fooled Weston. And Emma, who is one of Shepard’s strongest female characters, has the strength and independence to seek to live alone in Mexico, and to ride a horse into *The Alibi Club* and destroy the place with a shotgun; but she is presumably destroyed herself when she tries to leave—she takes Ella’s car keys and runs offstage—moments later, there is a “*huge explosion off stage. Flash of light, then silence*” (197).

So while Shepard’s female characters during this time were certainly more developed, they still were still relegated to marginalized conditions. In part, this is because many of his plays from the late 1970s and early-to-mid 1980s depict women

who are intended to reflect the men in his plays, as he discusses in a 1993 interview.

Carol Rosen asked Shepard whether he considers plays such as *A Lie of the Mind* as

“feminist pieces,” to which Shepard responded:

there was a period of time when there was a kind of awareness happening about the female side of things. Not necessarily women but just the female force in nature becoming interesting to people.

And it became more and more interesting to me because of how that female thing relates to being a man. You know, in yourself, that the female part of one's self as a man is, for the most part, battered and beaten up and kicked to shit just like some women in relationships. That men themselves batter their own female part to their own detriment. And it became interesting from that angle: as a man what is it like to embrace the female part of yourself that you historically damaged for one reason or another? (“Territory” 6-7)

Shepard's comments suggest that although he has progressed in his depiction of female characters, he is still a playwright who is fundamentally concerned with the male experience. While his attempts to rediscover the feminine side of men indicates a progress of sorts, it seems as if he does not provide his female characters with a space of their own. Is Shepard unable to see beyond the male side of things?

While Shepard's plays do tend to concentrate on the unsuccessful struggles of white men to achieve their vision of American character, his female characters contain more texture and dramatic importance as he continues to write, demonstrating his interest in expanding his examination of identity. As Shepard himself attests, his early female characters mostly fall into the category of emblem—they are marginal characters who mostly play subservient roles to the male characters. Then, as Shepard continued to write, he began to explore “how that female thing relates to being a man.” But some of his more recent works contain female characters that deserve attention as more than simply reflections of his male characters. Even at the

time when Shepard claims his interest lies in exploring the female side of his male characters, the women in his plays take on a strength and independence that they had not heretofore achieved.

An excellent example of their newfound strength is May from *Fool for Love*. Shepard identifies May as “probably the most solid female character I’ve written. She really holds her own. [...] [She] is the strongest, not strong just in the sense of her own willfulness, but as a whole character” (Roudané, “Interview” 73). May is able to see past the fantasy of Eddie’s “lame country dream life” (*Fool* 25), and she exhibits a strength of will that represented a new departure for a female Shepard character. May displays a “desire for independence” which “seems driven in part by a wish to defy [...] gender typecasting and prove that she can cope alone” (Bottoms 197).

May, like some of the female characters who follow in later plays, such as Rosie and Cecelia from *Sympatico* and Conchalla from *The Late Henry Moss*, becomes more involved in the deconstruction of prevailing identities, something that Shepard had previously reserved for his male characters. The expanding inclusiveness of Shepard’s vision allows “Others” (i.e. women and minorities) to participate in the quest for individual and national identity. Shepard’s women begin to contribute to the identity-forming process by exposing the fallacious nature of American identity. May disillusioned Eddie’s American dream and challenges his account of past events. She takes over control of the story Eddie begins about the relationship between their parents, correcting his incomplete account. Dismissing both Eddie and the Old Man, May asserts, “I don’t need either of you. I don’t need any of it because I already

know the rest of the story. [...] I know it just exactly the way it happened. Without any little tricks added on to it” (*Fool* 70). Through her control of the situation and her exposure of Eddie’s American dream, May displays an insight into American identity that eludes most of Shepard’s male characters.

Similarly in *Sympatico* Cecelia explains to Carter how “‘Americana’ bores the shit out of me” (38), and Rosie informs Vince about the futility of escape: “This is it. There’s no ‘running off’ anymore. It’s a done deal” (102). Such figures demonstrate an awareness of the reality of the situation. Rather than continue to engage in a self-deceptive quest for a false identity, they refuse to play the game. Shepard’s implication seems to be that any search for identity that does not include women will never be successful.

Even Shepard’s female characters who do not directly challenge images of American identity still exert a great deal of influence over that identity. Meg (mother of Beth and wife of Baylor) from *A Lie of the Mind*, for instance, cannot be described as a strong or empowered character; yet significantly, she participates in the American flag-folding ritual with Baylor. While doing so, she asks a seemingly innocuous question: “Why do they do it like that?” (*Lie* 121). Baylor, who cannot answer the question, replies “I don’t know. Just tradition I guess. That’s the way I was taught” (122). Baylor’s response exemplifies the hollow construction of national character—while he deeply believes in the symbolism of the American flag, he has no understanding of its meaning and no connection to its tradition. So Meg’s innocent question subtly challenges the authority of that identity by pointing out the fact that Americans have no true conception of what it is they seek.

Still other recent Shepard women participate in the construction of identity by playing the role of redeemer. It is Consuela who ultimately grants Henry his freedom, allowing him to leave the village and return to his wife in Michigan. And even Henry's wife, who never physically appears on the stage, wields influence over Henry's identity. When Henry returns to America, he will go to Michigan—her hometown—instead of Texas, “home of the cowboys” (*Eyes* 30). Significantly, Henry's wife lives in Michigan because her mother, who is sick, resides there. So Henry's willingness to move to Michigan emphasizes female lineage rather than the typical father-son scenario that Shepard so often employs.

This same focus on woman's heritage is strongly evident in *Far North* (1988), a film that Shepard wrote and directed. *Far North* centers around three generations of women who live in Minnesota. While the film deals with the difficulties of men and women in an extended family, the focus is on Kate, who returns from the “big city” after her father, Bertrum, is involved in a horseriding accident. Besides Bertrum, the family consists entirely of women: mother Amy, daughters Kate and Rita, and Rita's daughter Jilly. Kate is also pregnant. Significantly, the family is continuing to produce future generations, but women are carrying on the family line; as Amy points out, there is “a notable lack of menfolk. There used to always be men. Always” (77). In *Far North*, Shepard's interest clearly lies with his female characters.

While Amy's comment may seem wistful, *Far North's* conclusion represents a celebration of female heritage, not a lamentation. The scene consists of a birthday party for the grandmother, and Shepard's screenplay notes specify that the grandmother “*is surrounded by the family and their children—all girls. Not a man in*

sight” (*North* 118). Kate, her granddaughter, offers a toast, “To our dearest grandma, Trenje—The Source of Us All!!!” (119). Shepard’s celebration emphasizes generational connectivity, but demonstrates a clear move away from the male heredity that dominates his earlier work.

Perhaps the most redemptive character in Shepard’s recent works comes from *States of Shock*, a significant transitional play representing the peak of Shepard’s crisis of confrontation. Glory Bee, the waitress, is rarely the focal point of the play, yet her presence is integral to the action. Her character has been somewhat oversimplified by some critics, such as Susanne Willadt, who argues that Glory Bee is “present mainly for decorative purposes. [...] Women characters in Shepard’s plays, as in *States of Shock*, very often are marginalized and portrayed mainly by negative stereotypes” (158).⁴⁰

But such an impression of Glory Bee ignores her role as redeemer. While Willadt is correct when she argues that Glory Bee “cannot be called a rounded character” (152) (through much of the play, Glory Bee’s role is that of the incompetent waitress), she underestimates the significance of Glory Bee’s character when she claims that “the way in which Glory Bee is presented can only lead to the conclusion that she is too dumb to have anything to say about the principal action taking place between Colonel and Stubbs” (159). Inept as a waitress and simplistic in her dialogue, Glory Bee (as her name strongly suggests) nonetheless symbolizes a restorative power. In *States of Shock*, she revitalizes Stubbs, who is the literalization

⁴⁰ Shepard’s treatment of his women characters elicits a great deal of debate. Some critics (such as Willadt and Felicia Londré) contend that women in his plays follow “the Shepard stereotype of the sexy, dumb woman” (Willadt 159), while others argue that Shepard’s female characters have become

of Shepard's incomplete American (Stubbs announces that he is "eighty percent mutilated" [*Shock* 14]), and allows him to recover his sense of wholeness by confronting the past.

Glory Bee's role becomes even more significant due to its casting. In the original production at The American Place Theatre, Glory Bee's role was played by African American actress Erica Gimpel. Although Shepard did not direct the play, he regularly attended rehearsals, so "one may assume that he intended the role to be played by a black actress, although he never makes this explicit in the text" (Willadt 160). Up to *States of Shock*, Shepard created very few minority characters, so his choice of an African-American female for the symbolic role of Glory should be noted.

Another intriguing female character in a recent Shepard play is Conchalla (*The Late Henry Moss*), the woman who was with Henry in his final days. Her character (played in both the San Francisco and New York productions by Sheila Tousey) has confused playgoers, who are not exactly sure what to make of her. Critics have described her as a "witch" (Lahr, "Ghost" 108), a "succubus" (Willman 69), and an "earth mother, whore, superwoman, and angel of life and death" (Simon, "Play" 73). While her symbolism has confused many, her role in the play suggests that she may be the key to the reclamation of identity. It is Conchalla who pronounces Henry dead. And it is Conchalla who ushers Henry to his death. She forces Henry to remember the details of the night he attacked his wife. In the final scene, Conchalla lays Henry on the kitchen table, "*then she lifts his head and starts pouring the tequila*

stronger and more integral to his work. For a more detailed examination of Shepard's female characters, see the work of Londré, Judith Roof, Carla McDonough, and June Schleuter.

into his mouth very gently, like medicine” (Moss 111). As Earl looks on, she then leads Henry to his demise as he finally realizes the consequences of his violent and destructive actions:

CONCHALLA: I will show you your father. You see him now? You see how he looks to me. Helpless. Hoping. Dreaming. Wishing for death. Wishing for some way out. [*Stroking Henry’s head.*] It takes courage, no? I gave him courage. A drowned man. He comes up for air. He gasps— [*Conchalla keeps pouring tequila down Henry as she straddles him. Stroking Henry’s head.*] Now he begins to go back home. Now—he begins to return. You will see. He remembers now.

HENRY: [*Spitting to get his throat clear.*] I remember—The day I died—She was on the floor.

CONCHALLA: [*Gently.*] Now, he sees. (111)

Conchalla’s characterization is somewhat ambiguous, as is evidenced by critics’ various descriptions of her. But her prominent role—and her power over all the other characters—cannot be ignored. In Conchalla,

Shepard brings onto his stage a Native woman, sensuous, with a mythic dimension and definitely Other. She brings with her clear vision, reverence for the dead, ritual, dance and a nonstereotypical way of being female. And it is she who—not maternally, but with great hardness—brings Henry to his death and closure to his suffering and macho failings. (Gelb 37)

In this character, Shepard incorporates many of the characteristics that he argues should be present in order to effectively reformulate an American identity:

Conchalla’s “reverence for the dead” demonstrates an acknowledgement of and respect for the past; she is connected to a much larger past through ritual; and she is responsible for the death of an outdated image of American character—the father is finally laid to rest.

Shepard’s creation of more complex female characters suggests his efforts to examine identity from outside a white male perspective. In his recent plays, Shepard has incorporated far more minority characters in leading roles (although they do not

all engage in the search for American identity). In *Eyes for Consuela*, Amado, Viejo and Consuela are all Latino characters; Shepard's 1992 film *Silent Tongue* (which he wrote and directed) addresses the state of an American Indian tribe in 1873; and Shepard's latest production, *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), has a cast which includes prominent roles for a Latino neighbor (originally played by Cheech Marin) and the Native American girlfriend of the title character.

Shepard's expanded interest in creating dynamic female characters and his examination of an "essence of myth" that can restore a collective sense of identity demonstrate his efforts to move beyond the limited scope of his earlier plays, which focused almost exclusively on a white male perspective; but ultimately his efforts seem to fall short. While he seems sincere in his attempt to explore new territories of American identity, his representations of Native American culture are somewhat simplistic, even in his most recent plays such as *The Late Henry Moss*. In it, Conchalla and Esteban both "veer dangerously close to ethnic stereotypes," as Allen Kuharski observes (502). *Moss* also generated renewed criticism about Shepard's inability to write rounded female characters, as Elysa Gardner remarks in her review of the play:

in a year when Broadway revivals of Shaw's Major Barbara and Ibsen's Hedda Gabler attest to the complex and fully realized female characters created by previous generations of playwrights, one is struck by the extent to which Shepard and many of his peers depict women more as symbols than fleshed-out human beings. (D2)

Gardner's comments suggest that Shepard's tendency to create women as symbols relegates his female characters to the margins, thereby continuing to place the focus on the men. Clearly, Shepard has struggled to revise his own conception of American

identity; his vision of it has remained rather focused and androcentric throughout his career.

Furthermore, Shepard's exploration of American identity also remains problematic because even while he examines new facets of identity, he retains the rather limiting framework of a single, unifying "essence of myth." As discussed in chapter one, Nina Baym and other critics have attacked the notion of a "cultural essence," claiming that no single ideology can represent the diversity of the nation:

Remember that the search for cultural essence demands a relatively uncircumstantial kind of fiction, one which concentrates on national universals (if I may be pardoned the paradox). This search has identified a sort of nonrealistic narrative, a romance, a story free to catch an essential, idealized American character, to intensify his essence and convey his experience in a way that ignores details of an actual social milieu. (1151-1152)

Baym's comments raise a good point about the multicultural composition of America—it seems impossible for an "essence of myth" to provide a valid representation of the country's entire citizenry.

Yet Shepard's efforts to move beyond his restricting paradigm are still notable. His recent works (*Sympatico*, *Eyes for Consuela* and *The Late Henry Moss*) represent new departures for Shepard as he attempts (albeit not wholly successfully to this point) to expand his vision of national identity. Stripped of their long-held conception of American identity, Shepard's characters have not yet found a new narrative from which to draw their vision of American character. Shepard has by no means resolved the paradox that afflicts Americans' quest for identity. But his most recent plays suggest progress, as they begin to provide a more inclusive, if not fully developed, perspective of identity.

Conclusion

BILL: But aren't I a hero
Above all that stuff
How could I just fall by the wayside
I'm fixed in the prairies and valleys below me
I'm fixed until heavens collide
SUE: You're vanishing Billy
Just look at your breath
Do you see it make ripples in space
You're gone with the wind like others before you
Not even leavin a trace
Not even leavin a trace
BILL: But I'm bigger than mountains
I'm bigger than time
I'm written in history pages
They'll find me in writing in two thousand years
They'll find me all down through the ages.
SUE: I'm glad that I'm dead
And never returning
I'm glad that I'm not in your shoes
There's nothing can touch me or bring me to mourning
For something as hopeless as you. (*Lament* 110).

Written in 1976, Sam Shepard's *The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing His Wife* received little attention from theatergoers or critics. Described by Stephen Bottoms as a "satirical comic-operetta" (125), the play was originally commissioned by the San Francisco Opera as part of a bicentennial celebration (Wade, *Shepard* 89). But ultimately the play was not included in the celebration and was not performed until later in the year (Oumano 105).

It is unsurprising that *Pecos Bill* was omitted from the bicentennial festivities. Despite Bottoms' claim that the play is "essentially light-hearted" (125), *Pecos Bill* addresses the death of a distinctly American myth—hardly a patriotic sentiment.

But despite its oft-neglected status, *Pecos Bill* merits attention because it exemplifies Shepard's continued struggle with the paradox of American identity. While Shepard's career has served to expose the illusory nature of a national character that promotes images of a pioneering spirit and (to use Shepard's description of the self-made American) an "absolute conviction of Manifest Destiny" (*Cruising* 3), it has also served to perpetuate the desirability of that character. Pecos Bill openly acknowledges that the image he embodies has lost its resonance in society, claiming that he is "lost and shamed, forgotten [...] in the memories of man" (*Pecos Bill* 106); but Shepard also infuses an overt feeling of wistfulness and longing into the play. As he sits on the "desolate plains," Pecos Bill laments, "My legend and time and my myth is forgot" (112). As much as Shepard seems to recognize the falsity of Pecos Bill's image, he also mourns its passing with regret and a sense of loss. Shepard seems to be struggling with the same paradox of American identity as his characters.

Shepard's own persona and comments support the contention that he grapples with the same issues of American identity as his characters. The "desert-raised, cowboy-absorbed writer," as one critic dubbed him (Senior 46), continues to be fascinated with the West, both in terms of physical geography and the mythic aura that surrounds it. In interviews, he is often asked about his propensity for Western settings and his ties to the American West. His responses to such questions provide insight into his own connection to such lands:

I just feel like the West is much more ancient than the East. Much more. It is. I don't know if you've traveled out here at all but there are areas like Wyoming, Texas, Montana and places like that, where you really feel this ancient thing about the land. [...] Of course, you can say that about New

England. But it doesn't have the same power to me, because it's this thing about space. [...] It's much more physical and emotional to me. [...] I was raised out here, so I guess it's just an outcome of my background. I just feel like I'll never get over the fact of being from here. (Lippman 10)

Shepard argues that because he is from the West, he will never be able to define himself outside of that "cultural environment," as he described it in an essay he wrote for the *Drama Review* in 1977 ("Language" 52). His connection to the geography of the West ensures that he "can't be anything other than an American writer" (52).

Besides his self-professed connection to the physical region from which he comes, Shepard's own lifestyle reveals his continued ties to the West, and suggests that Shepard himself still buys into the cowboy-pioneer-farmer image. One particular moment from an interview with Amy Lippman seems to illustrate Shepard's continued belief in the importance of that image. When asked about which playwrights have influenced his work, Shepard dismissively replied, "I don't know. What's the point? [...] I don't go to the theatre at all. I hate the theatre. I really do, I can't stand it. I think it's totally disappointing for the most part" (Lippman 12). Lippman followed up by asking what his "contemporary influences" were, to which Shepard responded,

Have you ever been to a rodeo? [...] Well, there's more drama that goes down in a rodeo than one hundred plays you can go to see. It's a real confrontation, a real thing going on. With a real audience, an actively involved audience. You should go to a couple of rodeos after you go to the theatre. (12)

While too much should not be made of a single comment, Shepard's response does seem to speak volumes.⁴¹ Clearly, a cowboy culture informs Shepard's work more

⁴¹ This moment is not the only one which links Shepard to the West he often portrays (albeit ambiguously) in his plays. During an interview while on the set of *Country*, Pete Hamill noted the cowboy-friendly interior of Shepard's trailer: "A copy of *Western Horseman* lies open on the couch.

than any literary or dramatic tradition. His assertion that rodeo offers something “real” indicates that such cowboy images are genuine and admirable—something to strive for. Such a statement is somewhat ironic because rodeo is a staged event, a reproduction. As *The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing his Wife* demonstrates, Shepard does seem to find something compelling about such images.

Although *Pecos Bill* passed mostly unnoticed, it is emblematic of Shepard’s struggle with American identity. Pecos Bill embodies the characteristics that Shepard represents as American ideals. He forges his own destiny by displaying self-sufficiency and a pioneering spirit. He demonstrates his inextricable connection to the land (“I’m fixed in the prairies and valleys below me”) through his larger-than-life deeds. His boastful claims represent a deliberate effort to show his control of the land:

BILL: And aren’t I the one
Who dug out the Badlands
SUE: And taught the wild bronc how to buck
BILL: And didn’t I dig out
The whole damn Rio Grande
SUE: And you did it all by hand (111)

Through such hyperbolic descriptions of his powers, Pecos Bill transcends any achievable image of identity. He is perhaps Shepard’s ultimate Super Cowboy Man—a “cowboy shape on the floor” that is ethereally floating in illusion rather than securely grounded in reality (Shepard, *Hawk Moon* 22).

But Pecos Bill is doomed. Even as he sings of his achievements, he recognizes his “vanishing shape,” and the last verses of the operetta reflect his dying status. Bill sings,

A new Remington 870 pump-action shotgun, propped against a wall, gleams dully. There is a bag of

And now I'm alone
On the desolate plains
Alone and drifting in space
My legend and time and my myth is forgot (112)

Much like the title character in *The Late Henry Moss*, Pecos Bill continues walking and talking (or singing, in this case), but he is already dead. His potency, his veracity as a character is lost. And also like Henry Moss, Pecos Bill recognizes that he died spiritually during an act of violence. Bill agrees to let his new wife, Slue-Foot Sue, ride his horse Widow Maker, but the horse bucks her so hard that she bounces to the moon. All Bill can think to do is shoot her to bring her back down to earth:

BILL: I could not think but what to do
So I pulled out that cold blue iron [...]
I fired and fired like a devil-dog
Shootin wildly in the sky
And I saw my dear sweet Sue crash down
Landin square on her naked eye (107-108)

Although Shepard stays true to the details from the folk tale of Pecos Bill⁴² (and so is not the originator of this violent storyline), he depicts a character who not only commits a violent act, but one who suffers an identity crisis after that act of violence. Bill pinpoints the moment of his own demise, lamenting,

Now you're dead and you're gone
And I'm just passin on
I can feel the cold sting of my guilt
I look for a place to bury you, sweet
But I'm buried as sure as you're kilt (109)

Red Man chewing tobacco on a table" (76).

⁴² According to *The Handbook of Texas Online* (a project coordinated by The General Libraries at the University of Texas at Austin and the Texas State Historical Association, the story of Slue-Foot Sue's death is this: "On their wedding day, Slue-Foot Sue, Pecos Bill's girl friend, was determined to ride Bill's famous horse, the Widow-Maker, but the animal pitched Sue so high that she almost hit the moon. Her steel-spring bustle continued to bounce her so high that Bill finally shot her to keep her from starving" ("Pecos Bill" par. 1).

Bill's identity death connects him to a number of other Shepard characters. Henry Moss remembers "The day I died—She was on the floor" (*Moss* 111). In *States of Shock*, both the Colonel and Stubbs lost their identities following a gunfight; Stubbs announces "The middle of me is all dead. The core" (14). In *A Lie of the Mind*, Jake begins his identity crisis after brutally beating his wife. In *Buried Child*, the family loses its identity when Dodge kills the baby and buries it in the backyard.

But the image of American identity that Pecos Bill represents has an amazing capacity to persist, Shepard argues. Later in the same year that Shepard penned *Pecos Bill*, he staged *Suicide in B-Flat*, a play about the attempt to escape the pressure of enforced identity.⁴³ In it, Niles appears onstage wearing a cowboy outfit and singing, "Pecos Bill, Pecos Bill, Never died and he never will" (214). The impact of Pecos Bill, and the image he portrays, persists.

Like Henry Moss, the walking and talking ghost who does not believe he is dead, this vision of a national character continues to surface in American culture. There is a year-round professional rodeo tour in which contestants compete in events such as bareback riding, steer wrestling, team roping, saddle bronc riding, tie down roping, bull riding, and barrel racing. Overall winners can earn more than \$20,000 in a single tournament ("PRCA Weekly News Release"). There are cowboy fantasy camps, such as the Sankey Rodeo School (with camps in Kansas, Missouri, Ohio, Georgia and Colorado) and Paradise Ranch in Oregon, which provide evidence of the persistent nature of the allure of the pioneering spirit of the cowboy. The introductory material

⁴³ For a more detailed discussion of the examination of identity in *Suicide in B-Flat*, see chapter two, pp. 63-70.

on Paradise Ranch's website demonstrates the appeal of rediscovering a connection to the Western lifestyle:

Every child dreams of being a cowboy. Out on the open range, sleeping under the stars, not a care in the world. But then real life grabs you by the throat and you realize that instead of roping cattle you're being roped by a demanding boss, crying kids and the day-to-day grind of just living. Imagine that you can escape to a world you only dreamed of if only for just a few days. Well, you don't have to imagine anymore. ("Paradise Ranch")

Paradise Ranch's suggestion that you can "escape" to an illusory identity strongly echoes Shepard's characters' escapist efforts. Such appeals to the belief that a better life exists that embodies American character seem to exemplify Shepard's assertion that "we've always been seduced by advertising" and that "the American Dream is always this fantasy that's promoted through advertising. We always prefer the fantasy over the reality" (Roudané 70). This advertising serves to perpetuate an American identity that consists of illusion and myth more than reality.

Other examples of the persistence of this same national character abound in American culture. Currently, the cowboy way is being used to sell trucks for Chevy and cheeseburgers for Burger King. Seemingly daily, some television station is showing a John Wayne or Clint Eastwood western. And in 2002, in Damascus, Maryland, 116 people gathered at the Walton League firing range to participate in a Cowboy Action Shooting competition. A quick-draw target shooting contest, Cowboy Action Shooting is "a sport enjoyed by nearly 50,000 American grown-ups who never quite outgrew playing cowboys and Indians. They love to dress up in 19th-century cowboy garb and compete in shootin' matches with 19th-century cowboy guns" (Carlson C2). Although such competitions seem rather eccentric at first glance, they occur all over the nation. And the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS) that

sponsors them has almost 50,000 members nationwide in a \$500-million-a-year industry, according to SASS founder Harper Creigh (C2).

Despite the persistence of this vision of American identity, Shepard's work has steadily resisted the concept of the Super Cowboy Man as an American ideal. In his early works (from the 1960s through much of the 1970s), he exposes the paradoxical impulses of escape and return as a direct result of Americans seeking to embrace a national character that does not exist. Beginning with *Buried Child* (1978), Shepard began writing plays in which some of his characters gained the ability to recognize the futility of their quest. These characters begin to confront their perception of American identity by acknowledging their connection to past events on both an individual and national level. This crisis of confrontation culminates in *States of Shock* (1990), and since that play Shepard's works have depicted an identity void that results from an America in which its citizens have lost any sense of a collective narrative that unites them as a nation. As yet, Shepard has offered no suitable replacement; but his work has undergone shifts that indicate a move away from the cowboy identity to which he is so often linked.

The Ongoing Struggle for Identity

Even as Shepard explores new territory, he clearly has not stopped examining the complex nature of the individual's quest for identity. Two separate comments from Shepard, from disparate sources, illustrate Shepard's career-long interest in the problem of identity. The first is from *Seen and Heard: Teenagers Talk about Their Lives*, for which Shepard wrote the foreword:

To me, one of the strangest and most terrifying things about being human is the need to come up with an identity. It has always bewildered me, and I can say that even now it's still mostly unresolved... "Who am I?" As hackneyed and simplistic as the question might sound to us of the dot-com e-mail computer age, it may still remain the most important one we can ever ask. (qtd. in Roudané, "Sam Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss*" 290)

While some might contend that Shepard's remarks are influenced by the target readers of *Seen and Heard* (teenagers are arguably as involved with the search for identity as anyone), Shepard makes similar comments in an interview for *American Theatre*, a very different readership:

This problem of identity has always interested me. Who in fact are we? Nobody will say we don't know who we are, because that seems like an adolescent question—we've passed beyond existentialism, let's talk about really important things, like the fucking budget! (*Laughter.*) Give me a break! There are things at stake here—things of the soul and of the heart and we talk about the budget! Sorry to get so excited. (Coen 28)

As Shepard's remarks indicate, he believes that the search for identity remains a central trait in our lives. And, as has been shown, that quest for character becomes intertwined with the character of the nation. Shepard's plays have consistently challenged the notion of a stable, accessible national character that all Americans can aspire to achieve. While his attempts to address this theme have not always been met with either critical or public acclaim, he has doggedly pursued his interest in the American's relationship to national identity.

Ultimately, Shepard does not arrive at any new form of American identity. As he admits, his examination of identity is "still mostly unresolved." But Shepard's progression away from an outdated concept of American character is significant. Such progress has proven difficult for Shepard's characters and for himself. In a 2000 interview, he commented on the importance of an individual's awareness of the

larger forces that influence identity: “At the very best, I think that all we can hope for is to see that these forces are in action, and that we’re being pushed and pulled and turned in one way or another and how we ride these waves” (Roudané, “Interview” 76). Such comments may help playgoers and critics understand the contradiction that routinely appears in Shepard’s works. In his plays, Shepard attempts to force recognition from his characters, placing them in situations that disillusion them of their conception of American identity. He seeks to show Americans that they must look to a new “essence of myth,” one that is grounded in a genuine connection to their ancestors and to the land rather than “a dream” that “is based on a lie,” as Amado tells Henry in *Eyes for Consuela* (*Eyes* 35). In order to do this, Shepard argues that Americans must resist being “seduced by advertising” that sells an illusory and incomplete image of American identity and discover an identity that is more genuine:

The friction there, the tensions there, particularly in this country, are huge. You see, there’s always this battle going on between what I am inclined to believe through the influences coming from outside, and what I sort of instinctively feel myself to be, which is quite a different creature. So you can’t help but get nuts in that predicament. [...] It can be divided in all different kinds of ways: male and female, violent and not so. And I think this “split” is where a lot of the violence comes from in the United States. This frustration between imagery and reality. (Roudané, “Interview” 71)

It is precisely this division between his characters’ idealized and actual lives in America that often controls their behavior. In looking for new sources of national character, perhaps Shepard’s characters—and the nation—can find a “true” identity, and Americans can end their futile and self-destructive pattern of escape and return that forms the heart of an American paradox.

Appendix A: Shepard's Major Works

1967	Days of Heaven (Actor)
La Turista	
Cowboys #2	1979
	Savage/Love
1969	
Unseen Hand	1980
Operation Sidewinder	True West
Mad Dog Blues	Resurrection (Actor)
Cowboy Mouth	
Back Bog Beast Bait	1981
	Raggedy Man (Actor)
1972	
Tooth of Crime	1982
	Motel Chronicles
1973	Frances (Actor)
Hawk Moon	
Blue Bitch (BBC tv)	1983
	Fool for Love
1974	The Right Stuff (Actor)
Geography of a Horse Dreamer	
Little Ocean	1984
Action	Paris, Texas (Screenplay)
	The War in Heaven
1975	Country (Actor)
Killer's Head	
Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue	1985
	A Lie of the Mind
1976	Fool for Love (Actor)
Angel City	
Suicide in B-Flat	1986
The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the	Brownsville Girl (narrative song w/
Eve of Killing His Wife	Bob Dylan on Knocked Out Loaded)
	Crimes of the Heart (Actor)
1977	
Inacoma	1987
Curse of the Starving Class	Baby Boom (Actor)
Rolling Thunder Logbook	
	1988
1978	Far North (Director, Screenplay)
Seduced	Steel Magnolias (Actor)
Tongues	
Buried Child	

1990

Bright Angel (Actor)

1991

States of Shock

Defenseless (Actor)

Voyager (leading role, filming of
which is detailed in Cruising Paradise)

1992

Silent Tongue (screenplay, director)

Thunder Heart (actor)

1993

Pelican Brief (actor)

1994

Simpatico (director, playwright)

Safe Passage (actor)

1995

Streets of Laredo (actor)

1996

Cruising Paradise

Lily Dale (actor)

1998

Eyes for Consuela (from Octavio Paz's
"The Blue Bouquet")

2001

The Late Harry Moss

Appendix B:
Plot Synopses of Discussed Shepard Works
(all dates represent year of first production)

***La Turista* (1967)**

Kent and Salem, siblings who may also be lovers, are on vacation in Mexico in Act I. The play opens in a seedy Mexican hotel, as Kent, afflicted with diarrhea (or “La Turista,” as the locals call it), laments his current condition. But he also bemoans his spiritual condition, discussing a diseased state of America and Americans. At several points in the play, “American rhetoric is offered for his cure,” as Elizabeth Hardwick details in her review of *La Turista*’s initial performance at the American Place Theatre (67). Act II shifts to a more sanitary American hotel room. Kent now suffers from “Encephalitis Lethargica, also known as sleepy sickness” (*Turista* 280). A doctor and his son attempt to cure Kent, but their efforts to convert “a dying man into a thing of beauty” (291) backfire, as Kent resists, eluding capture. In a dramatic final image, Kent leaps bodily through the upstage wall, leaving a cutout silhouette of his body as the lights fade.

***The Unseen Hand* (1969)**

Willie (whom Shepard also identifies as “The Space Freak”), an alien from Nogoland (a planet two galaxies away), arrives on earth to locate three cowboy brothers, Blue, Cisco and Sycamore, so that they can save his planet from the constricting authority of the High Commission. Willie hopes they will come “into Nogoland blazing your six guns” (*Unseen* 8) and rescue his people. After recruiting them, Willie falls into a trancelike state in which he discovers that the power to defeat the Unseen Hand that the Commission uses to control its citizens “was all in my brain the whole time” (29). Armed with “the ancient language of the Nogo,” Willie destroys the Commission “by breaking free of the Hand” (29-30) and returns to help his people rebuild their lives. The play ends with the three brothers unsure of what to do with themselves. Blue and Cisco wander off while Sycamore decides to just “stay awhile” (31). As the lights fade, Sycamore delivers a monologue in which he explains “there comes a time to let things by . . . Let the world alone. It’ll take care of itself. Just let it be” (32).

***Operation Sidewinder* (1969)**

This elaborate play centers on a giant mechanical snake, which emanates light, rattles, and even sways and glides in a sidewinder motion. The mechanical snake, as a character known only as Young Man explains, is also a computer, the result of a secret government experiment: “The Air Force cooked it up to trace flying saucers” (248). (*Sidewinder* 222). The government has been conducting military exercises in

the desert. The plot is further complicated by two groups of incompetent revolutionaries who hatch a plan to taint the Army's drinking water with dope, and by a tribe of Indians led by Mickey Free (a half-Indian) who initially assists the rebels but later abandons its role in the events. The action culminates with government forces storming the Indian camp, where Mickey Free, who has obtained the snake, is leading a sacred ceremony. In this climactic final scene, the Native American rituals nullify the soldiers' power, and the tribe suddenly disappears from the stage in a burst of light and sound, with the suggestion that its members have achieved a higher state of enlightenment.

***Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974)**

Beaujo and Santee, two henchmen who work for a man named Fingers, kidnap Cody from his home in Wyoming. Fingers is a gambler who wishes to exploit Cody's gift for picking winning racehorses. But Cody's skills, along with his physical condition, are deteriorating as he is moved from hotel room to hotel room; he hasn't picked a winner in a long time. In an attempt to revitalize Cody's powers of prediction, Fingers tells his thugs to switch Cody over to greyhound racing. Suddenly, Cody's ability to pick winners returns. Cody's captors sense that his powers are fading though, and Fingers brings in a doctor to surgically remove Cody's "magical bones," where Cody "collects certain valuable substances from his dreams in the back of his neck," as the doctor explains (*Geography* 304). Moments before the doctor can operate, Cody's brothers, wearing "*well used and authentic*" cowboy gear (306), blast their way into the room with shotguns and kill all the criminals except for Fingers. The brothers save Cody, leaving Fingers in the hotel room listening to "Zydeco et pas sale," from *Clifton Chenier's Very Best* (307) on the record player.

***Angel City* (1976)**

Rabbit, "a kind of artist-shaman, arrives in a nightmare version of a Hollywood production office, which is replete with all the clichéd ingredients (dictatorial producers, would-be-starlet secretary, hack script needing rewrites)" (Bottoms 133). Ostensibly, Rabbit has been hired to salvage a film production; as Wheeler, one of the producers, explains, "We have come to believe that it's only through a major disaster being interjected into this picture that we'll be able to save ourselves from total annihilation" (*Angel* 70). But as Rabbit learns more about his job, he begins to think the "state of emergency" that Lanx (another producer) keeps referring to applies to the city instead of the film (67). Wheeler fears that "the city is eating us alive," a fear augmented by the fact that his skin has turned green. Rabbit's solution to the problem is to unveil his magic bundles, which he lays out in the form of a "Medicine Wheel," a ritual he attributes to Native American myth. Ultimately, the success of the ritual Rabbit invokes remains unclear; *Angel City* ends with Rabbit and Wheeler opening one of the bundles, which oozes "*a slow, steady stream of green liquid, the color of their faces*" (111).

***Suicide in B-Flat* (1976)**

Suicide is a “detective story murder investigation” focusing around Niles (Bottoms 128), who has suddenly disappeared at the beginning of the play. A successful musician, Niles “has responded to pressure by repeating himself artistically” (Cohn 183). In order to escape this repetition, Niles has somehow transcended the physical world and vanished. Pablo and Louis, two incompetent detectives, are investigating the scene, hoping to find clues to indicate the true nature of the crime. Unable to make sense of the situation, they interrogate two musicians, Petrone and Laureen, who are waiting for Niles to return. Niles appears on the stage, but in his new state he can only be seen by his accomplice Paullette, who serves as “a sort of spiritual guide from ‘the other side’” (Shewey 105). Niles and Paullette begin to kill off various American personas, such as the entrepreneurial capitalist and the cowboy. Niles dons representational costumes (black tails with a cigar and a cowboy outfit, respectively) while Paullette executes them using first a submachine gun and then a bow and arrow. The weapons have little effect on Niles, but they wound both Pablo and Louis. In the final scene, Niles reappears to the rest of the characters, and Pablo and Louis apprehend him, handcuffing Niles “so that all three are locked to each other” (*Suicide* 229).

***Curse of the Starving Class* (1978)**

The first of Shepard’s “family trilogy” (also consisting of *Buried Child* and *True West*), this play focuses on the highly dysfunctional Tate family. Living on a dilapidated avocado farm in California, the father is a drunkard and deadbeat, the mother is a self-absorbed woman who shows little concern for her children, and the kids are both unstable, exhibiting wild mood swings and violent outbursts. Weston, the father, has accumulated a great deal of debt in his drunken state, and he has signed over the deed to the ranch to Ellis, the owner of the Alibi club. Ella, the mother, has also agreed to sell the farm to Taylor, a shady real estate dealer who has already bilked Weston out of some money (neither parent consulted the other or told the children of their intention to sell). Weston spirals downward in a drunken descent until he wakes up and takes an early morning walk around his land and realizes “I was actually the one walking on my own piece of land. And that gave me a great feeling” (*Curse* 185). After this epiphany, Weston takes off his dirty old clothes—“like peeling off a whole person” he says (185)—and feels reborn, ready to commit to his family, his land, and a renewed sense of identity. But it is too late for Weston; he has incurred too much trouble. Ellis sends henchmen out to the ranch to collect the debt, but Weston has already fled for Mexico. His son Wesley is doomed to repeat his sins of his father—an issue that the play brings to the forefront with repeated discussions of the family’s nitroglycerin blood, as daughter Emma describes it: “Something in the blood. Hereditary. Highly explosive” (152). In the final scene, Wesley demonstrates the inescapability of his heredity by donning his father’s dirty clothes, saying, “they fit me” (191).

***Seduced* (1978)**

Henry Hackamore, on overt parody of reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes, has fled America, resituating himself on an unidentified small, remote island. He further recuses himself from society by holing up in an empty house with the shades drawn tight, exclaiming “Nothing from out there comes in here! No life! Not sun, not moon, not sound, not nothing!” (*Seduced* 237). His paranoid behavior continues to surface throughout the play, as evidenced by his habit of carefully covering his body with Kleenex. Henry spends much of the play belittling or giving orders to his servant, Raul, and interrogating two women, Luna and Miami, that he has flown in to see him. Henry mostly wants the women to describe the life that he has been cut off from. “You two are my last link,” he pleads, “my very last possibility . . . For remembering. For bringing something back” (262). Ultimately, Henry decides to return to America in grand fashion: “We’re going to climb into sixteen black Chevrolets and drive straight out across the Mojave Desert” (254). Raul, however, refuses to let Henry leave—he produces a gun and demands that Henry compensate him for his services. In the final scene, Raul empties the pistol into Henry’s stomach; but the bullets have no effect and Raul “*collapses forward on his knees in a gesture of supplication*” as the lights fade (276).

***Buried Child* (1978)—Pulitzer Prize winner, 1979**

The barest details are these: after bearing Tilden and Bradley, Halie conceived another child; the possibility exists (and is at times overtly suggested) that the child is Tilden’s; the child was killed, presumably by Dodge, and buried in the backyard. All the family members seek to deny the truth of any of this, yet through the course of the play they are forced to confront the memory of their actions. As the play continues, the family’s dysfunction is revealed. Dodge is a boozing, mean-spirited man who cares more for his TV than his family. Halie focuses most of her attention on flirting with Father Dewis in order to establish a statue for her dead son (who may or may not have actually existed). Tilden is “*profoundly burned out and displaced*,” as Shepard describes him in the stage directions (*Buried* 69); a former all-American, Tilden never developed mentally, as Halie explains: “He’s still a child” (77). Bradley, who wears an artificial leg, is a bully, terrorizing Dodge and Tilden especially. Vince, Tilden’s son (Vince’s mother is never mentioned), returns to the household after a five-year absence, bringing his girlfriend Shelly with him. Vince wants to reconnect to his heritage because, as Shelly explains, “Vince has this thing about his family now” (*Buried* 86). At the end of the play, Dodge, who quietly dies moments later, wills all his possessions, including the house, to Vince. Vince abandons Shelly and officially takes over as head of the household. Meanwhile, Tilden has unearthed the buried child from the backyard and slowly carries the rags and bones up the stairs in a dramatic final image.

***True West* (1980)**

As the play opens, brothers Austin and Lee are sitting in the kitchen of their mother’s house. Austin, an Ivy-league graduate, is housesitting for his mother (who is on

vacation in Alaska) and working on a screenplay for Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer. Lee, a general miscreant, is in town to case his mother's neighborhood (for potential burglaries) and to irritate his brother. Lee interferes with Austin's meeting with Saul, and manages to blow Austin's movie deal by selling Saul on his own idea for a project: a "true-to-life Western" (*True* 19). Lee bullies Austin into writing an outline for the script, which reads like a conglomeration of every Western cliché known to Hollywood. But the film studios are excited about the project, and willing to pay \$300,000 for a draft. Distraught about the cancellation of his own project, Austin gets drunk and refuses to continue working on the outline. Instead, he breaks into neighborhood homes and steals toasters. Lee, also very drunk, attempts to write the outline himself, but ends up getting so frustrated that he smashes the typewriter with a golf club. (During the course of the play, the brothers will trash most of the kitchen that comprises the set.) At this point, the mother returns. Lee decides that his screenplay is "a dumb story" after all, and states his intention to go out on the desert to live (taking his mother's china and silverware with him). Austin wants to go with him, but Lee won't let him. So Austin attacks Lee, nearly killing him with a telephone cord around the neck. But ultimately neither brother gains the final advantage, and in a compelling final image, the two brothers circle each other as the lights fade.

***Fool For Love* (1983)**

As the play opens, Eddie, a broken-down cowboy (Shepard dresses him in boots held together with duct tape) has tracked down his lover, May, in a hotel room "*on the edge of the Mojave desert*" (*Fool* 19). The audience quickly gets the impression that Eddie and May engage in an endless cycle of self-destructive behavior: they fight, he leaves, she moves on, he returns, they fight, he leaves. "It'll be the same thing over and over again," May tells him. "We'll be together for a little while and then you'll be gone" (31). This time their fight is about a mysterious other woman, the Countess (who never appears onstage), with whom Eddie had an affair. Also onstage is the Old Man, who (according to the stage directions) "*exists only in the minds of MAY and EDDIE*" (20). Old Man turns out to be the father of both Eddie and May—he apparently maintained two separate families in two different towns. Eddie and May verbally duel over the "truth" of Old Man's past, offering conflicting accounts of Old Man's story of a man who "fell in love twice" (48). An offstage explosion, caused by the Countess blowing up Eddie's truck, interrupts the storytelling. Eddie leaves the hotel room, assuring May, "I'll just take a look at it and I'll come right back" (56). May, knowing that Eddie won't be back, packs her suitcase and leaves. The only character remaining onstage is Old Man, and he ends the play discussing the woman of his dreams as the lights fade.

***A Lie of the Mind* (1985)**

This play focuses on the connection between two families; one consisting of Jake, his brother Frankie, sister Sally, and mother Lorraine; the other consisting of Jake's wife Beth, brother Mike, father Baylor, and mother Meg. The majority of the stage is

divided into two platforms that are located extreme stage right and left, with blank space in the center: “The impression should be of infinite space, going off to nowhere” (*Lie*, from “Set Description”). Each platform serves as the staging area for one of the families, and the action often shifts from one platform to the other. As the play opens, Jake reveals that he has beaten his wife into unconsciousness and left her for dead. She survives the attack, but suffers brain damage that impairs her ability to speak, resulting in short, clipped dialogue. Frankie goes to Beth’s family home to see how she is doing. When he arrives, Baylor accidentally shoots Frankie in the leg, mistaking him for a deer. Frankie spends much of the rest of the play lying on Baylor’s couch as his leg worsens. Beth attempts to nurse Frankie, and she imagines a scenario in which she and Frankie get married. Meanwhile, Mike has hunted Jake down, and forces him to come apologize to Beth. Instead, Jake abdicates his position as Beth’s husband, telling her to stay with his brother. In the final scene, Meg stares across the stage at the other platform, where a small fire is burning in a trashcan (the fire was started by Lorraine who was burning mementos in a previous scene) and says, “Looks like a fire in the snow. How could that be?” (122).

***States of Shock* (1991)**

This is a chaotic play in which Colonel enters a diner pushing Stubbs, a disabled war veteran, in a wheelchair. The two men are together “to observe the anniversary of the death of [Colonel’s] son, killed, we’re told, by the same ‘friendly fire’ that left [Stubbs] maimed and apparently brain damaged. (He keeps saying the same things over and over.)” (Kramer 78). It is also suggested that Colonel is actually Stubbs’ father, although this point is never wholly clarified. After placing their order with Glory Bee, an incompetent waitress, Colonel begins to interrogate Stubbs on the details of his son’s death. “What we’re after is the hard facts,” he says (*States* 15). “The situation has to be faced!” (19). Also present onstage are White Man and White Woman, who are made up to look “*white and pallid, like cadavers*” (5); these two characters spend most of the play complaining about the waitress or being verbally abused by the other characters. Glory Bee informs everyone that the diner is under siege. In a weird series of events, Stubbs regains his ability to communicate, and (with the aid of Glory Bee) gets out of the wheelchair. He now remembers all the details from the day he was wounded—Colonel was present when it happened and later denied it (as well as denying he was Stubbs’ father). Stubbs’ revelations restore his own strength and potency, while weakening Colonel, who sits in the wheelchair that Stubbs vacated. The play ends with Glory Bee passing out gas masks (Colonel does not get one), which the characters put on while singing Leadbelly’s “Good Night, Irene.” During this action, Stubbs takes Colonel’s sword and stands behind him, seemingly preparing to decapitate Colonel as the image freezes and the lights fade.

***Simpatico* (1994)**

A prominent member of the horseracing scene, Carter obtained his position through deceit and nefarious deeds. His successful scheme—to blackmail a racing

commissioner by setting him up in a compromising sexual situation and then taking photographs—forms the locus of the play. Years after the crime, Vinnie, Carter's accomplice, is tired of life spent hiding out in Cucamonga, or as Vinnie describes it, "the edge of nowhere" (*Simpatico* 19). Vinnie has a shoebox containing all the evidence (which is mostly photos and negatives) of the crime. If Carter helps him smooth over a situation with his girlfriend Cecilia, Vinnie will give Carter the box. Carter agrees to the deal, but when he returns to Vinnie's hotel room with Cecilia, Vinnie is gone. In the next few scenes, Vinnie presents the same shoebox to each of the other participants in the scheme: First he visits Simms, the target of the blackmail, and offers him a no-strings-attached opportunity to seek revenge. Simms refuses, preferring to leave it all alone: "Why is blood more appealing than rebirth?" (*Simpatico* 61). Next Vinnie visits Rosie, Carter's wife (and Vinnie's ex-wife, to complicate matters), who is also the woman in the illicit photographs. Vinnie wants to give her the shoebox and run away with her, but she also refuses, telling him "It's a done deal. You're in your little hell and I'm in mine" (103). Vinnie hands her the box and returns to his hotel room in Cucamonga, where he discovers a broken-down Carter in his underwear "*wrapped up tightly in blankets with the shakes*" (121). Vinnie announces his intention to create a new life for himself by becoming a private investigator, and leaves Carter on the floor. Cecilia appears at the hotel room to return Carter's money. (Thinking Simms would take the photos from Vinnie, Carter sent Cecilia to offer Simms money for the evidence.) In the play's final moment, Carter's cell phone rings and rings and Cecilia says, "Somebody ought to answer that" (135) as the lights fade.

Eyes for Consuela (1998)

This play is adapted from Octavio Paz's "The Blue Bouquet," a 1961 short story in which "Paz's unnamed narrator is threatened by a man who says he is gathering 'a bouquet of blue eyes' for his girlfriend. Finally convinced that the victim's eyes are brown, the man let him go" (Weales 531). In Shepard's version, Henry, a middle-aged, middle-class white man, has left his wife and retreated to a small rundown hotel in the middle of a Mexican jungle. While out on a midnight walk, he is accosted by Amado, a bandit who demands Henry's eyes, which Amado plans to give to his girlfriend Consuela as a gift. (His desire to cut out people's blue eyes represents a form of atonement—Amado inadvertently shot out one of Consuela's father's eyes during a Mexican festival.) Amado wants Henry's eyes because he is convinced they are blue, and "around here they're hard to find" (*Eyes* 10); but Henry maintains that his eyes are brown. This disagreement becomes the center of much of the action in the play, a production that mostly consists of philosophical discussions between the two men on love, marriage, national differences, repentance, and other weighty issues. Ultimately, Henry is released unharmed but with a new sense of life, and as the play ends he is preparing to return to his wife in Michigan. Instead of paying his hotel bill in cash, he agrees to surrender his luggage to the owner, Viejo. As he is preparing to leave, Viejo (who is also Consuela's father) tells Henry, "When you return to Michigan, you will see the snow with new eyes" (47).

The Late Henry Moss (2000)

The set for this play is “a run-down adobe dwelling, with a bathtub on a platform and little else. Here two estranged brothers, Ray and Earl . . . confront each other after the death of their violent loner father . . . and try to come to terms with the story of the bender he called his life” (Lahr 108). Their discussions are carried out with large quantities of alcohol and while their father’s slowly decomposing corpse sits in the background, prompting Earl to comment, “He’s starting to stink” (qtd. in Gardner D2). With the aid of a neighbor and a taxi driver who transported Moss to his final destination (a fishing trip with his mysterious girlfriend, Conchalla), Ray and Earl begin to “piece together both Moss’s last drunken days on earth and the events that led to their own estrangement” (Lahr 108).

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